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A LOOSE REIN.

A LOOSE REIN.

BY "WANDERER,"

AUTHOR OF "ACROSS COUNTRY," "FAIR DIANA."

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY G. BOWERS.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	MARKET DAY	1
II.	A LAWN MEET	11
III.	LUCY GERMAINE	23
IV.	GEOFFREY CLARE	33
V.	COMING HOME	43
VI.	A QUIET RIDE	53
VII.	A BIT OF COPING	65
VIII.	DOGS	77
IX.	A MUSTARD CAT	90
X.	A DEAL	97
XI.	A PLEASANT SURPRISE	102
XII.	"HE GIVES IT WILLING."	109
XIII.	OVER THE VALE	129
XIV.	TWO DEPARTURES	142
XV.	A SOCIAL EVENING	150
XVI.	THE BEAK	161
XVII.	CONSOLATION	166
XVIII.	CASTLE CLARE	172
XIX.	A HUNT	180
XX.	LARKSPUR AND SILEX	193
XXI.	THE HALL	201
XXII.	MR. CLOVER'S HARRIERS	209

CHAP. PAGE
XXIII.—EYCES AND CREEME 221
XXIV.—THE COUNTRY IS SHOCKED 225
XXV.—THE BOTTOM OF THE OOZE 231
XXVI.—THE COLONEL AT HOME 241
XXVII.—NOT HALF A BAD SORT 247
XXVIII.—EXILE 257
XXIX.—MR. KAVANAGH'S HOUNDS 264
XXX.—BOYCOTTING 272
XXXI.—THE RESCUE 289
XXXII.—VICTORY 297
XXXIII.—HIS FIRST FOX 304
XXXIV.—A GRAND HUNT 314
XXXV.—VISITORS 321
XXXVI.—THE EVICTION 334
XXXVII.—CONCLUSION 346

LIST OF COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS.

PAGE

"WHAT ABOUT YOUNG MR. CLARE?" 6

"OLD NUTTS KNOWS HOW TO DO THINGS" 23

"SCARCELY IMPROVED IN APPEARANCE" 45

"HE FELL ANYHOW" 60

"HAVE ANOTHER GLASS OF SHERRY, THEN" 82

"THE BROWN GALLOPED WELL" 95

"IS GERMAINE'S WINE BAD, THEN?" 112

"HAVE A LEG UP, SIR?" 127

"WENT SIDEWAYS AT THE DITCH" 139

"NOW, NO HUMBUG, PLEASE!" 158

"BRING THE OTHER ONE OUT, MIKE!" 181

"FELL INTO THE BOREEN, WITH A CRASH" 191

"MORE BRANDY AND MORE SODA!" 205

"MR. PEBBLES WAS A VERY ARDENT SPORTSMAN" 219

"GIVE ME MY HORSE!" 239

"A BLANK SHEET" 254

"NOT A PARTICULARLY LEVEL LOT" 266

PAGE

"'TAKE IT EASY, SIR,' SAID PEWTER" 283

"LAVE THE GIRL ALONE, YE DIVILS" 309

"THEY WILL HUNT ANY SORT OF GAME" 320

"ENOUGH TO PAY FOR A DOZEN CATS" 333

"SHE CAN ACTUALLY COOK" 350

LOOSE REIN

"WANDERER"

th illustrations by G. Bowers

HANHART LITH

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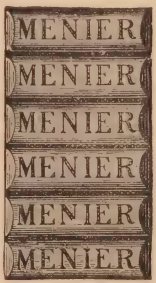

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A LOOSE REIN.

CHAPTER I.

MARKET DAY.

WAS market day in the town of Bancaster.

Market day was always lively, but to-day the stir and excitement were decidedly greater than usual. People congregated in knots in the High Street, and eagerly discussed the news which the last comer had imparted. The farmers, generally more anxious to sell or buy than to gossip (at any rate until after the "ordinary" at the George), forgot business in their desire to hear or to tell what had happened. The steps of the County Club were occupied by a group of members quite as much interested in the matter as their tenants. Ladies, too, who generally chose market day to come into the town to do their shopping, met and stopped to talk over the startling events which had surprised all Bankshire.

Not one occurrence only, but a succession of surprises had come upon the easy-going county.

Firstly, Mr. Shorthouse, who had hunted the hounds for fifteen years, and who was popular with gentle and simple alike, with landlords and with farmers, with old and young, with all, in fact, except with a few casual men, who rode across wheat and would not subscribe,—poor Mr. Shorthouse had had a stroke of palsy, and a meeting of the friends of the hunt was called for that afternoon to hear a letter read from his wife, and to decide what should be done. Everybody was sorry for his sufferings, and for Mrs. Shorthouse in her affliction, but there was much uncertainty as to what steps ought to be taken. It was now only February, and to stop hunting in so important and historical a country as Bankshire in the middle of the season seemed a very serious thing to do. Some were inclined to think that this would be the wisest course, either because they had screwed up their own horses, or because they did not really much care about the sport, or, as they themselves liked to put it, "out of respect for poor Mr. Shorthouse." But the majority were inclined to go on at any price, and to select a master, even if it were only for the remainder of the season. Under Mr. Shorthouse's management, and the fostering help of some of the neighbouring squires, the pack had of late years emerged from the obscure provincialism of a century. Much plough had been laid down in grass, and shooters began to find out that foxes could live in the same coverts as pheasants. Some of the worst enemies to the sport had died or left the country, and others had taken their place who wanted to gallop as well as to hunt. These, and their London friends, were liberal subscribers, so while the funds flourished, the breeding of the hounds improved, their pace quickened, and fine runs became more frequent events every year. Bankshire was naturally a magnificent country to ride over. There were wide pastures in the Warboro' Vale, with flying jumps. There were breezy downs between Wrottesmoor and High Cliffe, with thick patches of gorse and sheltered coombes where vixens laid up; there were big woods, too, extending southward from Chal-

ford, and westward from Donington, whence an almost inexhaustible supply of cubs were driven in the autumn to people the stickies and spinneys of the low country.

Ladies and children would not, on this market day, have been so very much interested in the news as to forget their shopping, if there had been nothing else to talk about besides poor Mr. Shorthouse's illness. This was to them the least important portion of the day's budget, though, of course, their tender hearts overflowed in exclamations of pity for the poor man. But, as a matter of fact, a small minority only cared whether hounds went on or not. Some anxious wives never had a moment's peace while their too enterprising lords were in the field; and to them it was a relief to think that the season of broken necks or at least fractured legs and arms would be shorter than usual. Others, mistresses of small households and moderate means, rejoiced that one channel of expenditure at least was likely to be closed. So in Bancaster, at any rate—whatever might be the case in the county—the women were far more anxious to discuss the second great topic—the return of Colonel Neville and young Mr. Clare.

Most of the matrons remembered Colonel Neville as a handsome, dashing young fellow of gentlemanly and pleasant manners, and some of them, forgetting the lapse of nearly eighteen years, almost expected to see him again such as he was when he danced all night at the Hunt Ball, and when he led the sports on the occasion of his coming of age. Since then he had only paid Bankshire flying visits of a day or two at a time. When General Sir Thomas Neville, K.C.S.I., died, his son, then a captain, was many thousand miles away fighting his country's battles. He would not give up active service, though a fine estate and a warm welcome were awaiting him in Bankshire. For more than ten years longer the welcome had to wait. As to the estate, the house was let on lease, and the land was in the hands of good tenants. Mr. Fosbrook, "our eminent legal luminary," as the *Bancaster Guardian* called him, was a careful and judicious agent, and Colonel Neville came over

to England twice, but each time only spent a few hours at the Manor. There were various reports about him. Some said that having had an early disappointment in love he was a confirmed old bachelor. Others declared, with some foundation for their assertion, that he had devoted himself entirely to the widow of his friend and comrade-in-arms, Captain Clare, whose son was now about to return to the country. Mrs. Pebbles, the wife of "our successful fellow-townsman," (again to quote the *Bancaster Guardian*), a butcher, who had retired on a handsome competence and a pretty little freehold farm, only a couple of miles from the market-place, was considered an authority on the subject, because in early days Mr. Pebbles had himself driven out thrice a week to the Manor with an ample supply of meat, and had continued this practice for the sake of old Sir Thomas Neville, long after his business justified his sending boys with carts all over the country. There was now no longer any one person holding the important monopoly by which Mr. Pebbles had made his fortune. There were, of course, butchers in Bancaster as of yore; but there was not THE one butcher. There were several rival establishments, and it was possible to purchase one's meat at any one of them. In old times none of the "good" people could hesitate. Pebbles would supply them as a matter of course, and Pebbles could afford a supercilious smile if some ignorant new-comer ventured to complain that the beef was tough or the mutton coarse. That new-comer would soon learn that Bankshire beef was celebrated all over the world, and that Pebbles was the only person who could be relied upon to supply it; that Bankshire mutton was as good as Southdown, and that Pebbles only knew the art of killing it. It was not merely to serve his customers with prime joints that Mr. Pebbles drove his cart over to Templeton Manor or Branscombe Hall. His object often was, to purchase cattle, sheep, or calves. He liked to buy his meat from persons whose byres were healthy and whose live stock was not kept for quick profit only. Thus Mr. Pebbles had many chats with his customers themselves, as he walked through their

yards, punched the sides of the cattle, or bargained in the library, and he had become quite an important authority about matters concerning the gentry around when he determined to retire, and become, as he expressed it, a gentleman himself.

So when Mrs. Pebbles, a lady of grand proportions and healthy appearance, drew up her phaeton at Victoria House, as little Mr. Woods, the draper, had called his shop, the keen senses of her friends soon found her out. Some ran her to earth in Victoria House, others, who owed Mr. Woods bills, waited outside by the phaeton, ready to "bolt" her the moment she appeared. There was a great flutter on the pavement of the High Street.

"*Dear* Mrs. Pebbles," said Mrs. Charges, the doctor's wife, laying her hand on that lady's arm as she was about to get into her carriage, "*Do* tell us all about it."

Now Mrs. Charges, the wife of a professional man, a real M.D., was of course more or less received everywhere, and was not therefore in the habit of being affable to Mrs. Pebbles. But Dr. Charges was a reticent man. His thin, sharp-nosed little wife was never able to get anything out of him. He attended some of the best people (though there was competition round Bancaster in this respect as in most others), and therefore, of course, knew their secrets. Not by a word nor a sign, however, could Mrs. Charges ever guess anything. When she tried to pump her husband he shut up like an oyster. After nagging in vain for a few years she abandoned any further attempts. To-day she "wanted to know," and perceiving Mrs. Pebbles, resolved on being polite to gain her ends.

"*Dear* Mrs. Pebbles," she said, "Dear Mrs. Pebbles! You are not in a hurry, surely. Tell us all about it."

"Yes, do!" chimed in Miss Charges, a young lady of sharp features and slight figure, who thought herself lithe and graceful, but was avoided by the gilded youth of Bancaster for her terrible likeness to her mother. "We are burning to know."

Mrs. Snow, the good-tempered wife of a large farmer, added her entreaties. "You know everything, Mrs. Pebbles," she said, "so give us the benefit of it."

There is no doubt that Mrs. Pebbles enjoyed her position. She was quite acute enough to know the reason of Mrs. Charges' affability, and she translated the eager look on Minna Charges' face into a hope that there might now be a prospect of something serious.

"Well, I'm sure I have nothing to tell, Mrs. Charges," said Mrs. Pebbles. "What do you all mean?"

"This about Colonel Neville!" cried the trio, in one breath.

"What about him, dears?" asked Mrs. Pebbles, affectionately.

"He's come back, we hear."

"So Pebbles tells me," answered Mrs. Pebbles, calmly.

"And he's going to stop at the Manor?"

"So I believe," assented the lady, who had meanwhile ascended the phaeton, and was preparing to drive off. "I wonder," she added, reflectively, "whether he'll have his meat from Beaver or Fennings? If I was him, I would not go near Fennings—no, not for worlds!"

As if Mrs. and Miss Charges cared where Colonel Neville bought his meat!

"What a horrid vulgar woman!" thought mother and daughter. But they dissembled.

"What about young Mr. Clare?" they asked.

"Who's 'e?" inquired Mrs. Pebbles, assuming ignorance. For she had no mind to be patronised by the doctor's women—a couple of stuck-up vixens, as she called them.

"Oh, Mrs. Pebbles," said Mrs. Snow, "why, of course you know who we mean! Why, it's the young man that the Colonel has taken care of; the heir to ever so much money, from what they say."

"Oh, *him!*" said Mrs. Pebbles. "I've not heard tell much about him. He's somewhere abroad, I think."

"But he's coming back for good?" asked Miss Charges, eagerly.

"Not for the likes of you," thought the ex-butcher's wife. But she did not say so.

"What about young Mr. Clare?"

"And about the Colonel. He's not married, of course?" asked Mrs. Charges.

"Married! why he's been married these ten years," replied Mrs. Pebbles, with a laugh.

"Good gracious!" called out all three. "We never heard of it before. Whom did he marry?"

"Some black princess with a lot of diamonds," answered Mrs. Pebbles. "I thought everybody knew *that*. Can I drive you anywhere, Mrs. Charges?"

Now this was a very severe hit on the part of Mrs. Pebbles. For although the doctor's wife was, by virtue of his position, of course entitled to talk to anyone in Bancaster without compromising herself, it would be a fearful thing if she were seen driving down the full length of the High Street in the butcher's phaeton. If this happened she felt that her hold on society, always insecure, would be entirely gone. Yet she was sure that Mrs. Pebbles knew more than she chose to tell, and for a moment curiosity almost overcame her scruples. But only for a brief moment. She recovered herself quickly, and said:

"No, thank you, Mrs. Pebbles. I am close home, you know."

"Good morning, then," and Mrs. Pebbles touched up her nag. Her man climbed up behind her, and the phaeton rumbled off, leaving the ladies only half convinced. Was Colonel Neville really married to a black princess?

"So Neville has come back?" said the Honourable Seaton Delaval to Mr. Germaine, as they met on the steps of the Club.

"Yes, and for good and all, I hope," replied the latter, shaking hands.

"I'm not old enough to know much of him," said Mr. Delaval. "I was only a lad when he was here last, at least to stop, you know. But they say he's a good man all round."

"No better!" exclaimed Mr. Germaine, warmly. "A man's lucky who can call Neville his friend, and there's no pleasanter neighbour nor straighter man across country."

"I am very glad he has come home then," rejoined the

"What's this I hear, sir, about Colonel Neville?" asked Snow. "They say he has come back."

"So he has," replied Mr. Germaine. "I hope we shall see him at the 'George' by-and-by."

"But they say that he's got married, sir," continued the farmer.

"Do they? Who is the lady?" asked Mr. Germaine.

"I do not know, sir. But they say she's a dark person—a black lady, in fact, with a lot of jewels."

"Dear me! That is curious. Where did you get this information, Snow?"

"Well, sir, my wife just told me. But I don't know where she got it."

"You may depend upon it then, Snow. If your wife told you, it's sure to be true."

"But," objected Mr. Snow, "you've been the Colonel's friend so long, sir, that you would be sure to know the truth."

"Mrs. Snow cannot be wrong," said Mr. Germaine; and nodding to the farmer, he stepped into the club, evidently determined not to be questioned any further.

So before the short afternoon had closed, the following facts were accepted in the town of Bancaster as absolutely true:—

Firstly. That Colonel Neville had returned from "foreign parts" with a wife as black as coal.

Secondly. That the said black wife had an infinite number of jewels and untold wealth.

Thirdly. That there was a large family of piebald children.

Fourthly. That young Mr. Clare, heir to millions, was hourly expected at Templeton Manor, and would take the hounds.

Lastly. That this young gentleman was both beautiful and virtuous, and being disgusted with his guardian's choice of a helpmate, had resolved to seek a wife among the fair maidens of Bankshire, it being a condition on which he held the property that he should marry in a twelvemonth from the present time.

CHAPTER II.

A LAWN MEET.

IT WAS a bright February morning, a fore-runner of Spring. But for the black bare branches it might have been May. The sun is shining into a deep lane, glinting on the bright spurs of two horsemen, whose boots are glistening like burnished steel in its rays.

One of them is Colonel Neville, of Templeton Manor, a straight-limbed soldier, aged about forty-four, though he looks much younger on horseback. He has a soft brown moustache, on a brown, closely shaven face, and the short hair which is just visible under his hat scarcely shows a silver line. Only when Colonel Neville lifts his hat, and exposes his face to the bright sunshine would the observer notice furrows which tell of many summers, and the grey hairs on the temples which prove that youth has passed away. Temperate and healthy, Neville had braved all climates and all dangers, carrying his life in his hand, and emerging stronger, braver, and harder than before, as gold tempered in the furnace. To-day, looking at his bright scarlet coat, his white cords, his easy, but perfectly erect seat on horseback, his dark but kindly eyes gleaming with anticipation of pleasure, and the touches of dandyism displayed by his mahogany tops, the neat bows below the knee, and the flower at his button-

hole, no one would have given the Colonel more than thirty. His horse is a well-bred, dashing grey, not an "old gentleman's conveyance" by any means. His stride is long and brisk, and his ears are pricked at every corner, as he moves his intelligent head, no doubt looking for the hounds, and wondering where they will throw off. The grey is over sixteen hands high with sloping shoulders and broad powerful quarters, which mean jumping.

The Colonel's companion looks less ambitious, older, and more inclined to jog along than to gallop across country at the heels of a flying pack. He is a man of comfortable appearance rather inclined to stoutness. Most people would say that he was fifteen years older than Colonel Neville, for his well-trimmed whiskers are grizzly, what little hair he has left is nearly white, and though fairly well "set up," his whole deportment is that of an elderly man. Yet he and Colonel Neville were college chums, and there is scarcely a year between them. Tom Kirk had lived the life of a Civil Servant in India: he had taken care of himself in his earlier years, and in his later ones had a crowd of servants to take care of him; he worked in *Cutcherry* under a punkah during the heat of the day, and was comfortably dictating "minutes," and reports in his cool bungalow, while Neville was sweltering under a tropical sun, or driving a wily enemy out of thick jungle, without any thought for his health or even for his life. And yet after all Tom Kirk, the prosperous civilian, who had even refused to marry for fear of the worries and responsibilities he might incur, now looked almost old enough to be the Colonel's father. But Tom had not abandoned his claims to fashion. He was carefully dressed in black, his breeches and boots no less resplendent than those of his friend. He was seated on a square, comfortable-looking cob, with docked tail and a hogged mane. Short below the knee, broad in the chest, with tremendous thighs, he was, as Kirk said, "about as clever as they make them."

"It's a devilish good thing that I came over a couple of months before you, Neville," remarked Mr. Kirk, "or you never would have been mounted like that at a week's notice."

"No, indeed," replied the Colonel, "you're certainly a good judge of a horse, Tom, though you don't ride hard yourself."

"No, it would spoil my digestion and upset my liver. Excitement is not at all a good thing for a man at my time of life. But I can't think I made a mistake in buying that grey for you."

"I am sure you did not, nor in the brown either, as far as I can judge. I only hope we shall have a gallop, particularly as it is the new Master's first day."

"Good morning, Neville," cried a third horseman, who turned out of a lane and joined the two friends, "Glad to see you out, it's the first time for many years."

"Yes," replied the Colonel, with a sigh; "it's just about ten years ago that I had my last run with the Bankshire, and a good one it was, too."

"I believe we shall have better sport than ever, now," continued Mr. Germaine, for it was he; "at any rate for you hard-riding gallopers."

"Not meaning me, I hope, Neville," interposed Mr. Kirk.

"No, Tom, nobody ever accused you of hard riding. I fancy you are thinking more of Allnutt's hunt breakfast than his foxes."

"I hate hunt breakfasts," said the Colonel; "and if Allnutt had not made such a special point of my coming over, I should have sent Kirk on alone, and tried to find you later on in the day."

"Yes," remarked Mr. Germaine, "he made a great fuss about it at the meeting on Thursday. We could not very well snub a fellow when he offered a hundred guinea subscription, and voted for Ralph Branscombe, could we?"

"Of course not!" agreed Colonel Neville. "Besides, I believe the fellow really wants to keep foxes."

"I have never breakfasted at Mr. Allnutt's before," observed Tom Kirk, "but I understand he does things well, and I have always a certain amount of respect for a man who gives you a really good meal, whoever he is."

"Well," remarked Mr. Germaine, a florid, elderly man, mounted on a handsome weight-carrier: "Allnutt has only been in the country a year, and is giving himself a great deal of

trouble to get on. But we have none of us been inside the house since he bought it."

"I suppose we must go in to-day," asked Neville.

"Why should we not?" inquired Kirk.

"Because if we do, we must ask the fellow back," said Mr. Germaine; "and though I am not a prejudiced man, I do not care to have a grocer dining with me."

"I suspect you mean that Mrs. Germaine would not care for the grocer's 'lady,'" said Mr. Kirk.

"Somehow, you men's wives never do care much for those gentlemen's 'ladies,'" observed Colonel Neville: "at least, so I understand; of course *I* don't mind, as there are no women in my house."

"What does it matter, if he gives you good dinners?" asked Tom Kirk. "I should not pay attention to what he says, but only think of what I am eating, and what I shall get to eat next."

"Frivolously irresponsible and carelessly epicurean!" exclaimed Colonel Neville, "that would not do if you were settled in the country, as we are."

"I can stand your big adjectives, Neville, so long as I have as good a dinner as you gave me last night. Confess, now, that man I found for you is a wonder, is he not?"

"Kirk, you are simply a pearl beyond price," replied the Colonel. "There is not another man in England who could have found two such horses at less than five hundred."

"Pooh; I ask him what he thinks of the *chef* I procured for him, and he pays me a compliment about the horses! You d—n with faint praise, Neville, or, rather I should say, with none at all. Is he a good cook, or is he not? Because if you think he is not, I shall have a very poor opinion of your judgment, and shall pity François for serving an unappreciative master."

"Don't get angry, Kirk. François is perfection, and I repeat that I shall never be able to repay the obligation under which you have placed me."

"Except by asking me to eat François' dinners," muttered Mr. Kirk.

"But just now," continued the Colonel, "I am thinking more of the horses than the cook."

"I am thinking of Allnutt's breakfast," rejoined Mr. Kirk. "Indeed, I trust it will be a good one, for I only took a cup of tea this morning."

"You're a gluttonous beast," remarked Neville; "you always were."

"If I were a pig, as you suggest, I should have eaten the devilled kidneys at breakfast. I am not a pig, but a philosopher. So I only ate some toast."

"Let's get on—we shall be late," said Mr. Germaine, "and then none of us will get anything, and poor Kirk will die of starvation."

The place which Mr. Allnutt had purchased a year ago was a fine old family house of the Queen Anne period, and he had had the good taste not to attempt to improve it. When the three friends arrived, a number of horses were being led round the spacious gravel circle before the front door, while the park on the outer side of the iron hurdles was dotted with horsemen and carriages. On the steps were two charming little girls, dressed in the most approved Kate Greenaway costumes, each with a basket of flowers on her arm. A graceful figure was moving about among the horsemen, and before Colonel Neville could frame a polite refusal, he had been persuaded by Mrs. Allnutt's sweet face and bewitching smile to trust the grey to a groom and enter the house. At the door one of the little girls offered him a button-hole, and then withdrew her tiny hand, saying, regretfully:

"Oh! you have one already."

"Never mind, dear," said Colonel Neville, "I shall be glad of one of yours. We will change, if you please."

While the exchange was going on Colonel Neville was surprised to see his friend's wife, Mrs. Germaine, come up the steps under Mrs. Allnutt's convoy. She had driven over with her daughter to greet the new Master on this his first appearance, and the late grocer's wife had been so successful with the

county lady as to carry her off in triumph to the dining-room with her daughter.

"Those that came to scoff remained to pray," whispered Mr. Kirk to his friend, as they entered the breakfast-room.

"Yes, confound the woman," muttered Mr. Germaine. "Sticking up those pretty little girls was a clever dodge. You can't be rude to children, you know."

Hunt breakfasts have so often been described, and are so much alike, that any detailed narrative of Mr. Allnutt's entertainment is quite unnecessary. Suffice it to say, that the new M. F. H. sat at his right hand, looking rather bored, and that a succession of farmers and local tradesmen and other followers of the hunt flowed steadily into the room, attracted rather by curiosity to see how Sir Ralph looked, and to give him a cheer, than by Mr. Allnutt's champagne or his wife's smiles. Tom Kirk found a comfortable corner, and proceeded to enjoy himself thoroughly. Mr. Allnutt made a speech far too long and too flowery for the occasion, and proposed Sir Ralph's health; then there was much shouting and knocking of knives by sturdy agriculturists, while Tom Kirk stretched his arm across the table for a fresh dish. But if the portly gentleman expected to have *his* health proposed in return, and to thus obtain another chance of addressing his friends, he was disappointed, for Sir Ralph Branscombe merely thanked him in a few words, and suggested that the hounds were impatient.

Amid much cheering chairs were pushed back, and everyone rushed to the door.

Soon the cavalcade, followed by any number of pony-chaises, village carts, and a few more pretentious carriages, moved off to draw the home spinneys.

There was a flight of sheep-hurdles across the park, two of which had been removed to let the field through. But Colonel Neville, who was old enough to know better, "larked" the grey over them instead of waiting his turn at the opening.

Mr. Germaine opened his eyes wide. Mr. Durnford, one of the staunchest supporters of the hunt, who farmed six hundred acres on the Templeton estate, said:

"Well, I'm blessed if the Colonel ain't younger than he was when he was a captain! What's come to him, I wonder."

Young Sparkes, a member of the new school of agriculturists, an *alumnus* of Cirencester, remarked:

"Old Neville has had too much champagne, or he's come back from India light-headed. He won't be quite so keen on jumping by-and-by, if we get a run."

Tom Kirk intervened sharply, "It'll take you all you know to beat him, Mr. Sparkes. He knew more about riding when you were a baby than you will ever learn."

Sparkes was shut up for the moment. But in his heart, Tom wondered at his friend's friskiness. The grey had been well tried round the park and over fences at home, and it was one of the Colonel's maxims never to jump when hounds are not running, so that you may be able to jump when they are. But Tom's astonishment grew, and was shared by all the Colonel's friends, when the latter put his horse at the awkward stake and bound which enclosed the cover, and forced his way through the tangled briars and underwood, instead of waiting outside with the rest of the field in dignified and unscratched patience. Perhaps Colonel Neville wished to escape the too numerous greetings of the many friends who welcomed him back in their midst. At any rate, he cracked his whip and crashed through the thick branches, and helped the hounds to draw the wood as if, as Durnford said, he had been a youngster from school. But all was in vain. There was no fox at home, and Neville emerged over a gate, looking rather less neat than when he went into Allnutt's house half an hour before.

"What on earth makes you so lively, Neville?" asked Germaine. "I never saw you play such tricks before, even when you were ten years younger."

The Colonel smiled. "No doubt you think I am screwed," said he. "I am not; but I am certainly in good spirits. Why not? I am home in England for good, it is a lovely day, the horse Tom Kirk has found for me is the best I have ever ridden, and—I have had good news this morning—news which makes me young again, though I have been expecting it daily."

"What is it, old man? Tell us all about it," said Mr. Germaine.

"My boy is coming back. Geoffrey will be home to-morrow."

"Geoffrey Clare?"

"Yes, of course; he is my ward, you know."

Mr. Germaine was silent for a moment. He remembered that Colonel Neville had taken charge of the widow and infant of his comrade, Captain Clare, who died of fever in India. He knew also that when the widow had succumbed some years later to the insidious attacks of consumption, she had appointed Colonel Neville her son's guardian. And since then, through the decease of several relations, the young man had become the possessor of a large fortune, the full enjoyment of which, however, was limited by various restrictive clauses. It was to be administered by Colonel Neville and an elderly lawyer till young Clare attained the age of twenty-five, and even then only the life interest belonged to him, his future descendants being "the tenants in tail." But all these circumstances did not, in Mr. Germaine's opinion, justify his friend in being so very delighted at the return home of a youngster who was no blood relation, and whom he had not seen for seven years. Mr. Germaine thought of the return home of his own boys from school and college, which was not an entirely unmixed joy. So he thought that his friend might possibly be a little disappointed. But he said:

"I am very glad to hear it. Is young Clare coming back for good? Is he going to live at the Manor?"

"I hope so," replied the Colonel. "He does not seem eager to go to college, nor to enter any profession. There is no need for his working, and, in fact, he will have plenty to do by-and-by in looking after the estates. But I should have liked him to spend a year or two at college."

"How old is he?" asked Mr. Germaine.

"Just twenty; he was at Eton till he was eighteen, and then on Petherick's advice I sent him abroad for a year or so."

"Have you seen him since you came back?"

"No. I had rather expected he would come across to

Plymouth to meet me, but my letter miscarried, or something, and he was stopping with some friends at Nice."

"It would be better for him if he would go to college," said Mr. Germaine.

"Perhaps it might be. But I will not force him to it," replied the Colonel.

"But, old man, do you think it right to let a young fellow of twenty decide so important a matter for himself?" objected Mr. Germaine. "A college education is an invaluable help for the future, particularly for a youngster of fortune."

"You are, of course, quite right, Germaine," replied Colonel Neville. "But if Geoffrey prefers working at home to going to Cambridge, I won't prevent him. He is not of a studious turn, and lads who are not keen to learn have more temptation thrown in their way at college than anywhere else."

"But he will not make any friends, and he will not learn anything."

"I don't agree with you. There are plenty of decent young fellows in the neighbourhood, Germaine, and I shall be there to help him. Besides, think of me all alone in that big house!"

"It will certainly be dull, sometimes," agreed his friend.

"Dull! It will be deadly. I have only been home a week and Kirk has been with me, but that place without a young face will be wretched. For years I have been looking forward to the time when that lad and I would come back to the Manor together, and he would help me to manage my place, and his own, and would ride with me to hounds, and look after the farms, and sit next to me at dinner. You have no idea of what it is to be alone all one's life, and to see your comrades one by one dropping off, or forming new ties. *You* have a wife, and a lot of children, Germaine!"

"As many as I want!" laughed the latter. "Perhaps more than I want, though," he added, "I could ill spare one of them. But you can always have men down from town, Neville."

"Yes; but you know I would rather be alone than have bores, and of my good friends but few are available; some are still in the service; others, poor fellows, are dead; many are married,

and have other fish to fry; so I'm pleased to have Geoffrey, and —by Jove, they have found!"

In a moment a long string of eager horsemen were pushing down the narrow ride which divided the spinney into two unequal halves. Hounds were busy on the right. Every now and then their music would die away, to be taken up again after a short interval of anxious silence.

"Who would have thought that old Allnutt had a fox!" exclaimed the Hon. Mr. Seaton Delaval, as he rushed past Mr. Durnford.

"Sure to be a bagman," replied the farmer. "You needn't hurry, Colonel."

"Why a bagman?" asked Neville, to whom the latter remark was addressed.

"Brown, at the station, told me he saw a box come down last night," answered Durnford.

"Well?"

"Well, Colonel, it was fresh from Leadenhall Market. As I passed the station this morning, Brown said, "You're sure to find, Mr. Durnford, for I saw the fox myself. He's come down all the way from London on purpose to show you gentlemen sport."

"He seems to be running all the same," said Neville, turning into the cover, as the music of the hounds fell fainter on his ear, "he's moving over Whitfield way."

A short scramble through underwood, and a canter down another ride brought the keenest sportsmen nearer to hounds. And in a few minutes the "whoop!" which resounded, told them that there was no chance of a run with *this* fox.

Disgust and vexation were depicted on the faces of most of those who quickly assembled in that sunny glade, with two exceptions. One was that of Reginald Delancy, who was engaged to Miss Queezer. Miss Queezer went out hunting, indeed, but was a fat pudgy little person, and by no means a bold rider, though she made a great nuisance of herself by pushing through gates and gaps according to her pony's sweet will. In a good run, Mr. Delancy would have had to fight a sore battle against his fondness for a gallop. Love would have drawn him to the rearguard

to hear the muttered anathemas launched at Miss Queezer's head, and to help her through gaps and hold gates open for her. Sport would have called him to the front. By the death of the bagman the difficulty was comfortably solved, at least for the time being. So Reginald Delaney looked radiant, but not more so than Edward Neville, whose thoughts had flown away from the home spinneys to Geoffrey Townsend. All Neville's future was bound up in Geoffrey. The lad's shortcomings at Eton, and his numerous scrapes, which were serious enough to reach the Colonel's quarters in South Africa, and his bungalow in the Mahalpoor Cantonments, were all forgotten, or put down to the natural high spirit of a generous if thoughtless boy. Geoffrey would begin life and prepare himself for the responsibilities of a large fortune, under the happiest auspices. Help, such as no tutor could afford; advice, which no other friend could give, would be at Geoffrey's disposal. No one in the country-side should have such good horses, and no young man, even in London, should have such a good start in life. If the boy were inclined to work he should have every facility; but if, as the Colonel thought likely, he was more devoted to outdoor pursuits than to study, no check should be placed on his inclinations. He might become a great statesman or a great rider to hounds: an orator or a sportsman; a model landlord or an ideal member of Parliament. But above all, with his father's, the gallant Clare's blood coursing in his veins, he could be no other than an honourable man and a gentleman. If the Colonel had occasional slight misgivings—only slight ones—as to his ward's aptitude for some day filling the highest offices in the State, he never had any doubts as to his being, even as a boy, a high-minded English gentleman. How could Claude Clare's boy be anything else? His father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather had all done their duty according to their lights. That duty consisted in fearing God, but no man; in fighting bravely for king and country; in telling the truth and shaming the devil; in feeding the poor and protecting the weak; in looking straight in every man's face, and craning at no fence. Neville had no fear of Geoffrey's neglecting simple and

easy rules like these; he would naturally observe them as his forefathers had done. He was anxious about further accomplishments which he believed Geoffrey was eminently fit to acquire; which, at any rate, his guardian would endeavour to teach him, through others when his own knowledge was exhausted, as the gallant Colonel knew well must soon happen. He must be more of a ladies' man than his forebears had been, more gentle in his manner, more varied in his talents. He must stand up before swift bowling and not disdain the tennis lawn. He must hold his own in a warm corner, and quickly knock over the driven partridge. He must practise the gentle arts of billiards and whist, so as to be good company in the best clubs, and he must not disdain music and poetry, so as to be a welcome guest in ladies' bowers.

Of course, he must be a thoroughly honourable gentlemen, but that the Colonel felt Geoffrey was already.

Some day—soon perhaps—the youngster would take unto himself a wife, and the old Manor would once more be lighted up by loving eyes, and in time the echoes of the long passages would be awakened by the merry laughter of children. Then even if blind constituencies refused to see Geoffrey's genius, Colonel Neville felt that he would be satisfied with his ward's domestic bliss, and would willingly spend his declining years in endeavouring to make him and his children happy.

"Old Nutts knows how to do things."

CHAPTER III.

LUCY GERMAINE.

"THAT was a capital breakfast, was it not?" remarked Tom Kirk to Colonel Neville, when they left Mr. Allnutt's home spinneys, and began jogging along the lane towards Whitfield. "Old Nuts knows how to do things."

"Well, there seemed to be plenty to eat," assented Neville.

"Plenty to eat! My dear fellow, you might say that of any corporation lunch in a provincial borough. Ugh! plenty to eat means big joints of beef, and huge hams, and overgrown turkeys."

"Well, I certainly saw some fine hams and turkeys too," remarked Neville.

"Of course there were," replied Kirk. "In fact, I had a delicate slice of a turkey's breast myself. But I was not thinking of such ordinary, every-day things. Bankshire turkeys are generally good. Did you try the *chaud-froid* of partridge?"

"No."

"No? What a pity! Nor the boned snipe?"

"I confess I did not," said the Colonel.

"Then, my dear fellow, you missed a treat. Never tasted anything better in my life. I wish you'd ask old Allnutt to dinner, if it's only to find out who his *chef* is."

"I have no objection to inviting Mr. Allnutt, as I have no ladies at home," replied Neville. "We will have him as soon as you like."

"That wife of his must be a vastly clever woman," continued Mr. Kirk.

"A very excellent upper servant, no doubt," interposed Mr. Germaine, with something of the *hauteur* displayed by county people to new arrivals, and with more of a sneer than was usual to him. But Mr. Germaine had not got over the bag fox.

"Upper servant be blowed!" cried Tom Kirk, quite hotly. "She looked lovely, and she was clever enough to coax Mrs. Germaine in, anyhow."

Mr. Germaine collapsed at the home-thrust.

"No doubt she knows what she is about," remarked Neville, pulling his grey back. "Where are your people, Germaine. Not gone home yet, surely?"

"They are somewhere behind in the phaeton," replied his friend. "Sure to be getting in everybody's way, so I keep as far as I can from them. They will certainly grind some fellow's boot-top with a wheel, or knock a boy off his pony with the pole, so I pretend to have nothing to do with them. No connections of mine as long as they hunt upon wheels. Don't you go near the trap, or you'll come to grief."

Heedless of the advice, Colonel Neville reined back his horse until the greater part of the cavalcade had passed, and the carriages approached. It was not long before he saw Mrs. Germaine's friendly face, greeting him warmly over a mass of comfortable furs. She was in a park phaeton drawn by a pair of good-looking cobs, who were controlled, or at any rate guided, by her daughter Lucy, a maiden of some sixteen summers.

"Why are you not riding to-day, Lucy?" Colonel Neville asked the girl, to whom he had chirrupped when she was a baby, whom he had dandled on his knee when she was a tiny child, and had in fact treated always as a favourite whenever he came to Bankshire.

"Dear Pippin is lame," replied she. "The stupid black-

smith hammered a nail into his poor foot, and he must be quiet for a few days. It's dreadful to have to drive, is it not? I almost wish I had not come out, it's so horrid to see all the others riding and not to be able to go myself."

"You need not grumble, Lucy," said her mother. "You get plenty of hunting, I am sure."

"Yes, mamma," the girl agreed, turning to her mother with a bright smile, which showed two rows of pearly teeth, "I know I am very fortunate, and I ought to be quite satisfied. It only makes me a little unhappy to think of darling Pippin with a nasty wound in his foot. He will *so* enjoy coming out again when he is well."

"Take care, Lucy," exclaimed Mrs. Germaine in alarm, as the eager cobs made a plunge forward, and the girl tightened her reins and closed her mouth firmly, while her lithe arm was stretched to the utmost. "I am sure the cobs are too much for you. Let Parker drive."

"Oh! please not, mamma dear," begged the daughter, "I can manage them well enough, and it is such fun. It is no joke at all driving when there is nothing in the way. Anybody can do that."

"You like having difficulties to conquer?" asked Colonel Neville, smiling.

"Of course; don't you? There is some satisfaction in it. There would be no excitement in life if there were no obstacles to overcome." And Lucy again looked up with a pleasant smile on her bright, youthful face. She could look up without danger now, for the cobs had obeyed the rein.

"That is very advanced philosophy for one so young as you," said Neville. "You have not had many obstacles in your path so far."

"That shows what *you* know about it. You have been away for a century or more, and have lived among nasty black people all the time," answered Lucy, merrily. "*They* don't think of French participles, and getting the genders right! That is one of the difficulties I mean!"

Neville laughed, and pulling the grey round to the near side, he addressed the elder lady.

"Mrs. Germaine, I expect Geoffrey home to-morrow."

"Indeed! Are you very glad?"

"I am," answered Neville. "You have no idea how I am looking forward to his return."

"You must bring him over to us at once," Mrs. Germaine went on.

"Thank you. I am sure to do that. But I shall probably ask you for more on his behalf than mere hospitality."

"We will do anything we can," replied Mrs. Germaine. "What will you want of us."

"A great deal, dear Mrs. Germaine. There is no lady in my house, and by-and-by I shall want to give a party or two to amuse the lad. Will you be the hostess?"

"I shall be delighted. Is that all? That is no trouble, for it will be a great pleasure to me."

"But there is more," continued Neville, lowering his voice; "I shall ask you for more than to act as hostess on one or two occasions."

"What else?" inquired Mrs. Germaine. "Go on! I shall be only too pleased to make myself useful in any way."

"I shall be constantly coming over to you to ask your advice. I have no wife to advise me."

"The oftener you come the better," said the lady. "What sort of a boy is he?"

"He is his father's son," answered the Colonel, proudly smiling, "and as such he will deserve any kindness you may be good enough to show him. He has been abroad since he left school," continued Neville, "and probably knows little of English society. Of course I shall do my best, but there are many matters which we stupid men do not notice, or which, if we notice them, we make offensive remarks about. Now women of the world, and you in particular, dear Mrs. Germaine, would be able to put a lad right about such things in a nice, delicate way."

"We will do our best," promised the lady, "and Lucy shall help if necessary."

"Thank you again!" exclaimed Colonel Neville. "Here we are at Whitfield. Lucy, you had better go along the road till you get to the white gate just beyond the village. Then turn to the right. You are sure to find us all at the further side of the wood."

Raising his hat, the Colonel turned the grey off the road, and joined the crowd of horsemen who were making their way over a stiff plough to the long fringe of woods which skirted the village. His mind and his heart were full of Geoffrey, and to-day a find and a run were matters of comparative indifference to him. Yet the pleasant temperature and the bright sunshine had their effect on him. If it had been rough and gloomy he would probably not have looked forward so gleefully to his ward's arrival. But to-day the sun seemed to shine far more brightly and warmly than it had ever shone before in February, and riding about among his friends and neighbours, after so long an absence, was in itself a pleasure. He was civil even to the few he disliked, and allowed Major Crewel, the most confirmed bore of the hunt—a man whom of all others he had feared and loathed for years—to talk to him with impunity. His heart was overflowing with human kindness, and he could not be rude nor cold to anyone to-day.

It was long past noon, and yet there was no sign of a fox. People began to grumble, and a few of the less enterprising talked of going home. Mrs. Germaine and her daughter turned the cobs away, and many of the others hunting on wheels followed their example.

"Do you remember Geoffrey Clare at all, Lucy?" Mrs. Germaine asked her daughter.

"Oh, yes, I can remember him, mamma, dear," replied the girl; "an awkward boy. Colonel Neville brought him over to us once, and we asked him to tea. He would scarcely talk at all. I think he was a very stupid boy."

"Probably it was only shyness. Recollect, he was very young then."

"But little boys are not always shy, mamma. They can often bow politely, and are very civil and pleasant."

"I dare say Geoffrey has improved by this time," said Mrs. Germaine. "It was three years ago when he was here last."

"Well, there was room for improvement," laughed Lucy. "He was an awful stick then. Why, he had no notion of tennis at all."

"Do you think that there can be no good qualities in a boy unless he plays lawn tennis, Lucy?"

"Of course not, mamma! I am not so silly. But Master Geoffrey did not seem to care to learn even; and he could not talk about anything."

"You mean that the subjects you cared about did not interest him," replied her mother; "but I hear he is very clever. So Colonel Neville told your father."

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl. "I did not know that. Then, of course, that accounts for his not caring for girls. I suppose the poor fellow has spent all his time moping over books."

"Very likely," replied Mrs. Germaine. "At any rate, I want you to be kind and gentle to him. Not that you are likely to be otherwise, my dear child; but I particularly wish you to be careful not to laugh at him if he is a little strange at first, as you do sometimes at people."

"I won't, mother, dear, if I can help it. Why are you so anxious about it?"

"Because, child, your father and I are so much attached to Colonel Neville. Is not that sufficient reason for being as kind as we can to the young man of whom he has taken entire charge?"

"Yes, mamma, dear," answered Lucy; "I quite understand, and I will do my best. I will try to teach him lawn tennis, if he will learn. Perhaps he knows all about it by this time."

"That, no doubt, is your idea of the greatest kindness you can show him," said Mrs. Germaine, smiling. "And perhaps, on the whole, you are right."

"It is grand," asserted Lucy, "but not so good as hunting. I wonder whether Mr. Clare can ride?"

"I should think so," answered Mrs. Germaine.

For some few minutes there was silence.

"I never quite understood," said Lucy, at last, "why papa is so fond of Colonel Neville. He has seen him so seldom."

"Why, dear, don't you like him yourself?" asked Mrs. Germaine, quickly.

"Of course I do!" exclaimed Lucy. "He is delightful! and though I really know so little of him, I think I like him next to you and papa and the boys and Gertrude, and perhaps—Pippin. But he is so very different from papa. It puzzles me why they are such great friends. They were not at college or soldiers together, or anything of that sort."

Mrs. Germaine did not at once answer, and Lucy rattled on:

"Papa hates books and officers, and is always on the farm if he is not hunting or shooting, or going to races. Now, Colonel Neville is so fond of the army, that I wonder he has given it up; and as to books, he is devoted to them. Rob says he carries a book about in his pocket, and reads while hounds are drawing for a fox."

"Nonsense, dear," interjected Mrs. Germaine.

"Well, perhaps that is only Rob's invention. But at any rate he reads a great deal—they say he has brought boxes and boxes of new books with him."

"True, Lucy, dear. But if you will be a discreet little puss, and not talk about it, I will trust you with a secret."

"A secret? Oh, do tell me, mamma!" exclaimed Lucy, her fair face flushing with pleasure, and her grey eyes opening even wider than usual. "I will be so very careful not to tell."

"It is only this, dear. When Colonel Neville came into his money some years ago (he was only captain then), and you were quite a little girl and your father was still in business, a great misfortune happened."

"What, mamma!"

"Your father's partner misused the confidence reposed in him, and ran away after losing a large sum of money."

"How horrid!" exclaimed the girl. "And was he caught and brought back?"

"No; but the worst of it was, that by going off in that way the firm was placed in a most difficult position. A very large sum of money was required at once in order to save the business from bankruptcy. You know what bankruptcy means, dear?"

"Yes, mamma; when people cannot pay their debts."

"It means more than that, dear; it often means breaking up a happy home, and destroying the future of a whole family. It meant disgrace and ruin for papa." At the recollection of the dreadful time of trial Mrs. Germaine wiped her eyes.

"But go on, mamma, dear, please. The disgrace did not happen, did it?" And Lucy turned a pale face and eager, anxious eyes on her mother.

"No, darling; thank God, it was averted. Papa did not know which way to turn. He wanted this money at once, and it was a great deal more than his business friends would lend him. He hoped it would come all right if he could only tide over a few weeks; but he could not be quite sure. Nobody would let him have the money, as they thought he had been careless, and had trusted his partner too much."

"How dreadful! Poor papa!"

"Just as he had given up all hope, and was going to 'put up the shutters,' as they call it, Colonel Neville came home, and heard all about it. He went to papa's office, and told him that he had heard of his troubles, and had come up from Bankshire to help him, if he could."

"How good of him!" cried Lucy, her face flushing.

"Yes; and it was all the kinder that really we did not know him intimately then, as we had only lived near his place a few years. Your papa would never have thought of asking him."

"And did Colonel Neville help? Did he lend the money?"

"He was most generous. He was, of course, very well off; but still it was an enormous sum even for him."

"How much, mamma, dear?" asked Lucy.

"Eighteen thousand pounds," answered Mrs. Germaine. "And Captain Neville had not got so much money available, so he actually borrowed half of it on what is called mortgage of his property, to help poor papa. Now are you surprised that we should all be fond of him?"

"No, indeed, mamma, dear! What a dear, good man! But was it all paid back?"

"All," replied Mrs. Germaine. "Do you remember papa buying Pippin for you?"

"Yes, of course, I do; it was when I was thirteen."

"Well, your father had paid the last instalment back just before. Then he felt he could spare the money to please his daughter."

"How nice of him!" said Lucy. "And when Captain Neville lent the money, I suppose everything was all right?"

"Captain Neville did more than merely lend the money," answered Mrs. Germaine. "As you said just now, your father is not very fond of books. But Captain Neville was always very clever, and though he knew next to nothing of business, he took matters in hand and helped papa through. He was wonderful. He actually gave up six weeks of his leave in the middle of the hunting season to put things straight, and he managed to get back some of the money that horrid partner had taken."

"I shall love him more than ever, mamma. I should like to tell him that I know all about it, and thank him from my heart."

"You must not do that, dear. You must keep the secret. He would be very angry if he thought I had told anyone. But you see if we can afford to live comfortably at the Elms, and you can have a pony, and I can drive about in a nice carriage, and Rob and Jack can go to school and college, it is all owing to Colonel Neville. He made the business come right, and when everything was prosperous again, he and I persuaded your father to sell it, and put the money safely in the funds. I have been much happier ever since. I was never comfortable before, because I was always anxious about matters. Thanks to him,

none of us have now any cause for anxiety. And you know he might easily have lost every sixpence, for if things had gone wrong, we never could have paid him."

The cobs turned sharply into their own carriage drive. Lucy felt tears glistening in her eyes, and glanced through them at her mother, who had not been able to tell the story without emotion.

When the smart groom had taken the reins to drive round to the stables, they went into the pleasant sunny drawing-room.

"We owe all this to Colonel Neville, then?" asked Lucy, turning to her mother.

"Everything here: the house, the garden, the horses, the dogs, and this very room," answered her mother. "God knows where we should have been but for him, and in what wretched little cottage we might have had to live."

"I will do my best for Mr. Clare, indeed," said the girl, kissing her mother. "Now I will go and take off my things, and think of all the wonders you have told me."

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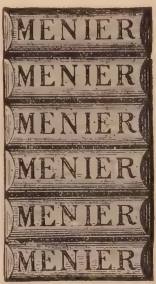

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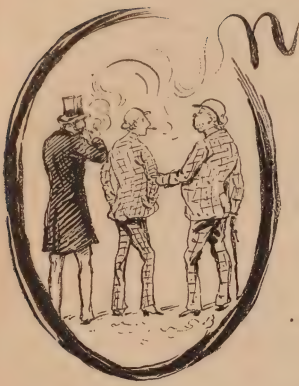
CHAPTER IV.

GEOFFREY CLARE.



THE evening of the market day at Bancaster, a few hours after the meeting at which Ralph Branscombe had consented to take the mastership of the hounds, a group of three men were talking and smoking on the terrace at Monte Carlo, a thousand miles away from the breezy downs and wide pastures of Bankshire.

"Rough on you, this, old fellow," said one of them, a sallow, thin-visaged man, of something under the middle height. "Just when you were in a vein of luck too."

"It *is* hard," assented the person addressed, a youth of about twenty, elaborately dressed in a suit of dittoes, showing very large and highly-coloured checks. "Why the old duffer did not stop away another month I don't understand."

"Why the deuce did he come back at all?" asked another. The last speaker was one of those men whom few would mistake for a teetotaller. His round, bloated face, his puffed cheeks, his sunken eyes, and his trembling hands, all betrayed the vice which preyed on him. Though young in years, there was no trace of youth about his appearance or his language. Mr. Weevil prided himself on being "a man of the world," and was a gentleman who, when sober, which occurred occasionally,

good enough for him. He won't take any notice of *us*," said Mr. Weevil. "He's civil to you because he knows you've a pot of money coming to you some day——"

"I wish I had some of it now," interrupted Geoffrey. "But here we are."

They approached the table. Some of the small punters made room for Geoffrey, who was already well known as one of the *habitués*. Templar moved to the other side, Weevil now taking his place to the right of the young man.

"*Faites votre jeu, Messieurs*," said the croupiers. Geoffrey flung down a dozen napoleons on the red.

"I shall back your luck, Geoffrey," remarked Weevil, placing a couple of gold pieces on the same colour.

The black turned up—the heap was swept away by the little rakes with the other little heaps or single coins, and in another minute the green table, with its various yellow lines and strange figures, was again dotted with silver, gold, and notes. This time Geoffrey went for *impair*, and won. Leaving his money down, he won again, and Weevil with him, for the latter always put down a couple of napoleons when Geoffrey staked his twelve or twenty. Gradually the young man became excited, and increased the amounts he risked. A close observer would then have noticed that Mr. Weevil continued to take two napoleons in his hand, and apparently threw them on Geoffrey's heap. But only apparently. In reality Weevil only dropped one coin, cleverly concealing the other in the palm of his hand, and restoring it to his pocket at a convenient opportunity. Thus, whenever Geoffrey lost, only one of Mr. Weevil's coins was swept off by the croupier, but when the young man won, Weevil claimed four napoleons of the large heap which was pushed towards them. Of course Geoffrey was far too absorbed in his game to count the coins—in fact there was scarcely time to do so. Only the practised eye of the croupier, as he pulled the heaps asunder, could count them almost mechanically, and pay the winners as quickly as he raked in the money of the losers. It never struck the lad for a moment that he was being fleeced by a little trick

of legerdemain *coram publico*, and he allowed Weevil to claim four louis every time he won, without the slightest suspicion. Once, when Weevil was withdrawing his hand which had just deposited a single gold-piece (instead of two) in his friend's larger stake, he looked up, and saw a pair of black eyes watching him very closely—more closely than he liked. They belonged to Mr. Egerton Paull, who was a silent but not unobservant spectator from Geoffrey's left. Weevil started, but quickly recovering himself, threw down two napoleons very demonstratively when the next *coup* came round. Gradually Geoffrey's store diminished. He was not only playing against the two per cent. of the Bank, but also against a tax of ten per cent. and upwards on his winnings. At such a game the Bank of England would be broken in a week. He ceased playing for a few moments, while feeling in his pocket-book for bank notes. While thus engaged some one whispered in his ear—"Mr. Clare, take heed. You are being cheated." He turned, and the eager crowd of players closed in the place at the table from which he moved.

"What do you mean, sir?" he said angrily to Mr. Egerton Paull.

"Come out of the crowd, and I will tell you," answered that gentleman.

"I am not inclined to lose my chances on account of your suspicions," replied Geoffrey. "It is late, and I must be off soon. Say what you mean, like a man, or leave it alone. Is it likely that I am being cheated at a public table? Is the Bank playing false?"

"Oh, no!" answered Paull. "But do not speak so loud. Everyone is listening, you see." And indeed a crowd of faces were now turned towards the two men who were disturbing the sacred stillness of the gambling hell by an unseemly discussion.

Geoffrey thought that it would be unmanly to listen to the advice of one who had incurred his displeasure previously by more than one warning. He suspected that it was a ruse of Paull's to get him away from the tables.

"Oh! leave me alone!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I know how to take care of myself."

"I'm afraid you do not," replied Paull; "but if you will not come away for a moment, I cannot help it. I have done my best."

He knew well that it was useless to make a public accusation against Weevil. Probably no one else had seen the trick, for it was no one's interest to take care of Geoffrey's money. If he brought a charge, Weevil, who was well known in the place, would have denied it indignantly, and after all it was only one man's word against another's. But Weevil could not read what was passing through Mr. Egerton Paull's mind. He was extremely uncomfortable for a few minutes, and only regained some confidence when he saw Geoffrey again "punting." But he left off staking any more single napoleons. One reason was that Geoffrey had now fallen back on bank-notes, and therefore the trick was no longer possible. Another and equally cogent one was, that Mr. Paull was still watching. Soon Geoffrey pushed his way out, anger and vexation depicted on his youthful and not unhandsome face. For Clare was a good-looking fellow, well set up, with good square brows, a wide white forehead, a complexion still almost girlish in its fair transparency, a slightly aquiline nose, wavy brown hair, frank grey eyes, and a sensitive well curved mouth. Only about the chin were signs of weakness. But he would have been called a fine lad anywhere, only now that his forehead was all puckered into lines, and his lower lip pushed out, and his eyes were half closed, he was decidedly ugly. Weevil hesitated for a moment to join him. In that short conversation with Paull, Geoffrey might have heard something to disturb their friendship, as he pleased to term it. But after all, what did it matter? He had better face the enemy at once, if enemy there were. So he also emerged from the throng and found the young man in the reading-room.

"This is a nice finish!" exclaimed Geoffrey.

"You've lost, then?" asked Weevil. "I was afraid so."

"Of course, I've lost. How can you ask? You must have lost, too, for you always staked on the same colour as I did," Geoffrey answered sharply, for a shadow of a suspicion flashed across his mind, that perhaps Mr. Weevil might have been the person whom Mr. Egerton Paull wished to accuse. But for the life of him he could not understand how Weevil could have cheated him, even if he had wished to do so, which he could not believe possible.

Weevil saw that he had made a mistake, and hastened to remedy it.

"Well, I lost quite enough before you began playing with notes. When you staked a thousand francs on each *coup*, I thought I'd better stop. I can't afford it so well as you, you know!"

"If Neville does not stump up, I'm done," said Geoffrey sulkily.

"The deuce you are!" exclaimed Captain Templar, who had now joined them. "How much are you out?"

"All the ready I've got," replied the youth. "I drew out the lot this morning before we left Nice, and that's all that is left," he said, contemptuously holding up a note for a hundred francs.

"That's not so serious, after all," remarked Mr. Weevil. "It is only your allowance."

"Confound it, man," said Geoffrey, angrily, "it's a good deal more. I coaxed old Neville's lawyer to send me five hundred three weeks ago to settle a lot of bills, and now I've just a fiver left to last till next quarter-day!"

"You should not waste your money paying bills," remarked Templar. "Let the Colonel do that."

"You stupid," said Geoffrey, almost laughing in spite of his vexation. "Do you think I am quite a fool? Of course, I have not paid a sixpence. I'm not of age yet, you know."

"Well done, old man," cried Weevil, slapping him on the back. "I would not have given you credit for being so sharp. Then you've lost——"

"Just the whole, and you fellows will have to help me home,"

answered Geoffrey. "What I am to do when I get there, I don't know."

"Oh, get the old man to stand you a thou'," said Templar. "It's your own money, after all."

"Of course it is," assented Geoffrey; "but it's deuced hard to get, all the same. Why he only allows me six hundred a year. What can a fellow do on six hundred?"

"It's devilish shabby," said Captain Templar; "devilish shabby, *I* call it, that a young fellow with an income of ever so many thousands belonging to himself should have to starve on a few hundreds."

"Those bills of yours will make the old chap sit up," remarked Weevil.

"They'll show him how to treat a gentleman," said Templar.

Geoffrey winced. He did not like to be reminded of those bills, which were rapidly approaching maturity.

"Templar," said he, "how much can you give me back?"

It was not easy to get money out of Captain Templar. It was the proverbial water out of the stone, only harder.

"I've been very unlucky," said the gallant officer.

"But you can spare twenty naps, surely?" said Geoffrey.

"Lord! twenty naps! Why, I've lost more than that to-night," said Templar; "you might as well ask for twenty thousand at once! just as much chance of getting it!"

"That is not what I call fair," answered Geoffrey, complainingly. "I treat you fellows well when I'm flush, and now I'm hard up you ought to do the same by me."

"He's right," said Weevil, approvingly, winking at the Captain behind Geoffrey's back; "we must do our level best for him. I've lost a lot to-night, as you know," he continued, "for I backed your confounded luck"——

"More fool you," interrupted Geoffrey—"I did not tell you to do it."

"No, no," said Weevil, soothingly. "It was not your fault. But I've just five quid left. Here they are. I'll see if I can't get tick to-morrow at Michaud's."

"Thank you, Weevil: that is behaving like a real pal. If I *do* manage to coax old Stick-in-the-mud out of some coin, I'll send you some directly."

"And," said Templar, not to be outdone, "here are three naps out of four I've got left. Don't say we left you in the lurch, old boy."

"Indeed, I will not," replied Geoffrey, full of gratitude, and all unconscious that on that very evening Weevil had fleeced him of ten times the amount he was now offering with such a show of liberality. "Now I've just time to wash my mouth out before the train starts. Come along."

"Garsong: cognac and siphon *pour trois!*"

In ten minutes the trio were on their way to Nice.

"It won't be so dull after all, old man," said Templar consolingly to Geoffrey. "It will be a deal worse for us here than for you."

This was flattering to the lad's pride, but he only said: "Why so? You can do as you please, eat, drink, smoke, and enjoy yourselves all round. I shall be shut up in that big house with the old man, and have to be as solemn as in church."

"But only for a very short time, Geof," observed Mr. Weevil. "He won't keep you there for ever, you know."

"I should think not," answered the boy. "He would find me rather an awkward customer if he tried."

"You'll be able to get away for as long as you like, with your pockets full of money, if you play your fish properly. You'll get some hunting," observed Templar. "I wish I could afford it."

"Hunting! I don't know much about it," answered Geoffrey, "but I believe it is the correct thing. All I hope is that the Colonel won't drag me over to Ireland. I've got property there, I believe; so, perhaps he'll want me to go and improve the estates, and get shot by some fellow behind a hedge."

"No fear," said Templar. "It is not likely."

"We shan't stop at Nice long when you're gone," said Weevil, sadly looking out of the window. "It won't be the same place, somehow."

"You'll have to come and stop at the Manor when you come back to England," said Geoffrey, touched by his friend's melancholy tone.

"You don't mean to say that the old fellow would have us down!" exclaimed Weevil, brightening.

"Why not?" asked Geoffrey. "You're my friends, and that's enough."

"He will want to estrange you from your old friends," said Captain Templar, shaking his head sadly.

"I hope not. At any rate, I'll stick to you through thick and thin," replied Geoffrey, squeezing their hands, as the train pulled up at the Nice platform.

"Thanks, old boy, we know you will. Remember you are to dine with us at the Club the night before next Derby, if we don't meet sooner."

"Oh, you will be at the Manor long before then!" exclaimed Geoffrey. "Good-bye, Weevil, good-bye Templar; take care of yourselves."

CHAPTER V.

COMING HOME.

WAS a little flutter of excitement at the Bancaster railway station on that Friday. It had got about that young Geoffrey Clare was expected; young Geoffrey, the millionaire, ward of rich Colonel Neville. Some credulous persons still believed in the Colonel's black wife, and half expected that she also would arrive, escorted by Geoffrey. But they were in the minority. Mrs. Pebbles' story was generally put down as apocryphal. Snow and others had met the Colonel in the hunting field, and though they had not ventured to ask him to his face whether he had brought home a nigger wife, they made indirect inquiries, and the reception they met with convinced all that the tale was a hoax. Mrs. Charges was one of the last to abandon her belief in its truth. Not that the wish was father to the thought, for, on the contrary, she and her daughter were much disappointed at the news that the Colonel was no longer in the matrimonial market; but because she could not suppose that that vulgar Mrs. Pebbles, who was no better than a butcher's wife, should have taken the liberty of palming off an absurd tale on *her*, the wife of the most distinguished professional man in Bankshire. So when she was told that

Colonel Neville had been seen out hunting twice, that there was no wife visible, nor spoken of, that Mr. Seaton Delaval had laughed outright at the suggestion, while Mr. Germaine only smiled quietly but seemed very much amused, that Sir Ralph Branscombe stared when he was asked and then shrugged his shoulders and told the questioner—our old friend Snuffbox—that he had put his foot into it again, then Mrs. Charges and Miss Charges vowed vengeance against all the Pebbles, and the former made the parlour so very hot for her husband that he retired to the surgery.

With the blackamoor wife, the piebald children disappeared from Bancaster gossip as a logical sequence. But the beautiful and virtuous Mr. Geoffrey Clare remained, and of him the talk waxed faster and more furious. The family estates in the county were so near and so familiar, that little exaggeration about them was possible; but his Irish property, being some four hundred miles away, and across the seas, grew with every hour. Only the name of the mansion was known, and this was enough to stimulate the imagination. It is not surprising that under the circumstances several of the Bancaster ladies, old and young, found that they had business at the station at that particular hour. One rather expected a friend from London; another had to see a sister or cousin off to Otterspool (the next station on the down line): a third had to complain of the irregularity of her book parcels from W. H. Smith's, and so on. Thus, there was quite a crowd on the platform, and the ladies were so fortunate as to kill two birds with one stone. For a dog-cart was drawn up at the arrival entrance, and Colonel Neville was toasting his heels in the first-class waiting room. Thus, those who had not yet seen the gallant officer, now had ample opportunities of observing him. The verdict was, that the Colonel did not look his years, and that the girl who could secure him for a husband would be very lucky. Those who could claim any sort of acquaintance with him, did not hesitate to hold out their little hands. One said boldly, "Oh, Colonel Neville, I am so glad to see you back. You don't remember me? No, of course not,

"Scarcely improved in appearance."

how could you? You and I danced together, though, at the County ball, some years ago! Does not that jog your memory? Ah!" this with a shake of the parasol or umbrella, "you military men meet so many ladies that you don't recollect them all, of course! You are sad butterflies, very sad! But I should have thought that you would not forget old Bancaster days. What! You are very fond of Bankshire, and are glad to get back? Then you ought to know me, surely. Don't you remember our waltzing to *Il bacio?* That was the fashionable dance tune then." Seeing that the poor Colonel, who was of rather a retiring disposition, became more and more confused, the lady would wind up with a climax, and say, with absolute certainty that the desired effect would be produced: "I was Miss Brown then. Clara Brown, you know?"

But Colonel Neville could only mutter: "Oh, yes, of course. I beg your pardon, Miss Brown——"

"I am not Miss Brown, *now*. Allow me to introduce my daughter. Carry, dear, this is Colonel Neville, of whom you have heard us speak so often. I am now Mrs. Green, Colonel."

"Indeed—very fortunate man, Mr. Green, I am sure. Excuse me, as I think the train is coming in, and I expect a friend."

And the Colonel rushed off, and steadfastly stared into the empty grate till the train actually pulled up at the platform.

There was only one first-class passenger of the male sex, so Colonel Neville had no difficulty in identifying Geoffrey Clare. Not that he would have recognised in the young man in the loud checks the boy whom, a few years ago, he had sent back to Eton with a five-pound note in his pocket; for his ward had scarcely improved in appearance. As he was at Monaco, so we find him at Bancaster. But of course the Colonel approached with outstretched hands. "Welcome to Bankshire, my boy," he cried, grasping Geoffrey's small gloved hand warmly in his own broad and muscular one.

The young man blushed, hastily threw away the end of a huge cigar he was smoking, and murmured an indistinct reply.

Geoffrey felt uncomfortable under the scrutiny of the Colonel's gaze. He fancied that Neville's grey eyes were looking into his very heart, and searching there for the trace of any folly he might have committed. "Conscience makes cowards of us all." The gallant officer was only trying to find in Geoffrey's face some resemblance to the well-remembered features of his old comrade. He was recalled to the situation by the sudden appearance of Mrs. Green and Mrs. Charges close to his ward's side. He had looked with unblanched cheeks into Afghan guns, and had faced the encircling "horns" of Zulu warriors. But he paled at the thought of these two women attacking him here, on the Bancaster platform, and hastily summoning a porter, hurried Geoffrey to the dog-cart.

As to the young man himself, he had reached Bancaster in a state of nervous fear. He had no distinct recollection of his guardian. There is an enormous number of years between the ages of fourteen and thirty-four, if they are measured by the standard of a boy's life. When Geoffrey had last seen Neville the latter appeared to him quite an old man. And the boy having got into a succession of scrapes, not always of a venial nature, Neville had, on the last occasion, assumed a stern demeanour, very foreign to his real nature. He had, indeed, relaxed so far as to give his ward a fiver when they parted, but the fiver was long since spent, while the recollection of the sternness remained. Geoffrey was therefore distinctly afraid of Colonel Neville, and had pictured to himself a worn old man, with a white moustache and a grave, repellent face. He was surprised to find a comparatively youthful individual, with few grey hairs; but the Colonel's long look at him reminded Geoffrey very keenly of his last interview, and he took his place in the dog-cart in no very cheerful frame of mind.

All his wishes were now tending to two aims—to get from the Colonel the money he wanted, and to leave Bancaster as soon as it was possible to do so. "A terrible martinet, I expect," thought Geoffrey. "He'll be awfully hard on a

fellow, though he looks young enough to remember the time when he was twenty himself. Beastly dull it will be, no doubt." Then he glanced quickly and shyly at the erect form sitting beside him on the driving seat of the cart.

"I am afraid you will find it rather dull at the Manor at first, Geoffrey," said the Colonel, in quite a friendly tone.

As this was exactly what the young man himself thought, he only murmured deprecatingly.

"But you will soon know everybody," Neville went on, "and then it won't be so bad. Besides, there is plenty to do; and we must go over to Ireland, you know, and look after your place there."

"Confound Ireland!" thought Geoffrey, "rather penal servitude." But he said nothing. His guardian was evidently anxious to put him at his ease, looking at him kindly more than once, though wondering inwardly what tailor and what hosier supplied the youth with his marvellous attire.

"Have you ridden much?" asked the Colonel, after a pause.

"Oh, yes," replied Geoffrey, brightening up. "Templar put me on a first-rate hack. I rode in the park a good deal last year."

The Colonel supposed that Templar was a livery-stable keeper, and only said:

"The park! Dear me, it is eight years since I rode there. Is it as full as ever from twelve to two?"

"That's the ticket," exclaimed Geoffrey.

"Ticket?" asked the Colonel. "Oh! I beg your pardon. I understand now. You see, I have been away for so long I've got rather rusty, and don't know the last new phrases."

"I'm afraid I've gone too far," muttered Geoffrey, quoting *Mantaque Noirs*. "I must mind my P's and Q's. Confounded bore, though!"

"Have you been out with hounds at all?" asked the Colonel again. "We hunt a great deal about here."

"I've never hunted, you know, but I'd like to learn," replied Geoffrey, with unusual candour, for he seldom admitted

that he did not excel in everything. But somehow the Colonel impressed him with the idea that it was of no use to try and humbug him about riding, at any rate.

"You will soon learn, my boy, never fear!" exclaimed Neville, pleased to find a sympathetic chord. "It is a wonderful sport."

"You're a sportsman, sir?" asked Geoffrey, timidly, after a short pause, and following out his idea of getting on the weak side of the old cove, as he expressed it to himself.

"I should think so! Are you?"

"Well, *reg*ther, just a little bit," replied the lad, with conscious pride. "Why, I've hardly missed a meeting at Newmarket since I left school, nor the Derby or Ascot, either."

"Oh! you go in for racing?"

"I know a good horse when I see one!" answered Geoffrey, who was going to add, "and I put on a fiver when I can," but checked himself in time, for fear of "rubbing the old chap the wrong way."

"I'm glad of that," replied the Colonel. "It will be very useful. There is a mare at the Manor that might carry you. She is a little too light for me. But you will want a couple more, and I shall be glad if you can pick them for yourself."

"Trust me for that," said Geoffrey, with a confident wink. "I was not born yesterday."

"There is a fine country round Castle Clare, they say," remarked the Colonel; "all grass, and carries a fine scent, though rather wild according to our notions."

"You don't want to take me to Ireland now?" asked Geoffrey in alarm.

The Colonel looked at him quickly, surprised at the young man's tone.

"Do not you wish to go?" he inquired.

"Well," said Geoffrey, hesitatingly, "I should like to stop in England for a bit, first."

"To find out all about Bankshire? Quite right, my boy, and very natural, too. You are an Englishman, although you *do*

happen to have dropped in for Castle Clare, and it is fair that you should learn all about the English property first."

"Not much to learn, I guess," ventured Geoffrey.

"Do you know anything about farming?" asked the Colonel, in surprise. "I wish I did. I have not been able to follow it up, having been away so many years. But I've tried my best."

"It ain't very difficult," remarked the youth, with some assurance. "There's silos and prickly pomfret, and all that sort of thing, you know."

The combination appeared somewhat curious to the Colonel; but he was pleased to find that his ward displayed a familiarity with agricultural subjects which he had never expected.

"We'll try a silo next June," remarked he, briskly.

"When have you got to sow it?" asked Geoffrey, thinking it would please the Colonel to give him his head a bit.

"Sow it? Oh, you mean the pomfret, I suppose. I really do not remember, exactly. Next month, I think."

Geoffrey was just sharp enough to see that he had very nearly put his foot into it, so he dropped agriculture for the moment and answered his guardian's questions warily. Soon they pulled up at Templeton Manor. Lunch was on the table, and Geoffrey was hungry. He therefore willingly accepted the Colonel's suggestion that they should begin at once.

"Who's the other Johnny?" he asked after a few minutes, pointing to an unoccupied chair.

Neville again stared. Curious language, thought he; I suppose it is the fashion nowadays. "That is Mr. Kirk's seat," he replied, and at that moment the gentleman in question entered the room. The Colonel introduced the young man with much warmth. Mr. Kirk just shook hands, nodded, and sat down.

"You are late, Tom," remarked their host.

"I'm not a lunch man, you know. I don't believe in it. One's obliged to eat something because of our absurd English hours: but the less the better. What is there, Staples?" he asked, turning to the butler.

"There's a *salmi* of pheasant, sir, and some mutton cutlets; or would you prefer a slice of cold beef?"

"Yes, cold beef, by all means. Mr. Clare," he added, turning to Geoffrey, "take my advice: never blunt your palate by highly spiced dishes at lunch. Now, unless there is wine in a *salmi*, and a certain quantity of various condiments, it is no *salmi* at all. But if you stuff yourself up with these things at lunch your dinner will be wasted on you. Take something plain—something just to sustain exhausted nature and no more."

"I'm not so blooming particular," said Geoffrey, who had been eating heartily, and had not spared his guardian's special East Indian sherry. He therefore felt more at his ease, though Mr. Kirk's speech puzzled him. "The best of everything is good enough for me."

"Oh, indeed!" remarked Tom, sticking a single eye-glass in his eye and gazing at Geoffrey. "Very right, too; the best of everything is good enough for you! Ha, ha! very good, very good indeed!"

Then Mr. Kirk, who had succeeded in making the youth uncomfortable, returned to his cold beef. Staples appeared to tell the Colonel that Mr. Snow was waiting below.

"I'll leave you two together for a few minutes," said he rising. "We can go round the garden and stables by-and-by. Snow wants to see me about the Hill Farm."

Kirk nodded, and went on with his lunch. Geoffrey was also silent for a short time, busy with the various sweets offered to him, which Mr. Kirk disdained. When the latter had quite finished he leant back in his chair and stuck his eye-glass in his eye again.

"That is a very remarkable coat you are wearing, Mr. Clare—a very beautiful coat, I may say. I hope you will forgive me for expressing my admiration."

Geoffrey positively blushed with pleasure. "I am glad you like it," he said. "*I* think it's a ripper."

"A ripper? True; a very terse and apposite description. A ripper. Quite so. May I take a great liberty, Mr. Clare?"

"Drive on," answered Geoffrey.

"Thank you. May I ask the address of your tailor?"

"Certainly. Tweed Brothers, 150, George Street," answered Geoffrey.

Mr. Kirk took out a tiny note-book and carefully wrote the address down. "I am much obliged to you," he said, with a bow. "May I trouble you again?"

"Go ahead, old cock! What's up now?"

"I should like—I should very much like—to have a look at that coat when you stand up."

Geoffrey was delighted. He stood up, buttoned the two first buttons, and showed himself off like a peacock. Mr. Kirk examined the coat critically, and expatiated on its merits.

"Why don't you get one like it?" asked Geoffrey at last.

"*I?* My dear Mr. Clare, think of my years and my figure! What would suit an elegant young man like yourself would be entirely out of place on an old fellow like me!"

"The old bloke is not a fool," thought Geoffrey, who was gradually mellowing into the most excellent humour, and willingly gulped down all Mr. Kirk's compliments. Geoffrey soon found out that his new acquaintance was the Colonel's trusted friend and adviser. He determined to be diplomatic, for he was still afraid of his guardian.

"I say, old chappie," he remarked, after they had exchanged many observations on tailors, actresses, and horses, "I've taken a fancy to you, d'ye know. You're a deuced good fellah."

"The feeling is, I assure you, quite reciprocated," said Mr. Kirk.

"Shake hands, then, old man," said Geoffrey, who had taken quite enough sherry. "Look here, you might do me a good turn."

"Anything to oblige you, Mr. Clare," replied Tom.

"Drop the Mister, will you! What about 'im, eh?" This was said with one thumb pointing over his shoulder.

"Him! who?"

"The Governor," Geoffrey went on: "is he the sort of chap who would shell out easy?"

"Shell out? I beg your pardon—I don't quite understand."

"Well, would he fork out if a fellow was hard up, you know?"

"He is very generous," answered Mr. Kirk, warmly.

"That's all right. Then I wish you'd ask him to let me have a thou'," said Geoffrey, boldly.

"My dear young friend, the request would come much more appropriately from yourself."

"Do you think it would? I funk him a bit."

"Of course: that's natural. But you need not be afraid, particularly," added he, "if you have other coats as striking as this one. The Colonel admires a well-dressed man; and you could not please him more than by a careful choice in your costume."

"Oh, if that's all, it'll soon be settled," replied Geoffrey; "I've dozens of 'em. Can't we go and have a cigar somewhere?"

"Certainly," answered Tom. "Come into the smoking-room. What an infernal young cad!" thought he, as he showed Geoffrey the way.

CHAPTER VI.

A QUIET RIDE.

THOUGH Mr. Tom Kirk had amused himself at Geoffrey's expense, and had put the lad down, perhaps rather hastily, as a young snob, he was too good-natured to keep up his *persiflage* for very long; and knowing how many and how great were the hopes which his friend Neville entertained of the youth, he was quite disposed to preserve at least a friendly neutrality. When Mr. Snow had departed, all three went to the stables. Their first visit was to the two trotters, "quiet and fast in double and single harness," which the judicious Tom had secured for the Colonel. Next, the latter opened the loose box occupied by the redoubtable grey.

"This is Hailstorm, Geoffrey!" said Colonel Neville, with pride, as the horse raised his lean head and pricked his ears forward. "Wo ho! old man," he continued, patting the grey's full but slender neck, and holding out a piece of sugar to him. Then he unfastened the roller and threw back the clothes, pointing out to the young man the horse's fine quarters and powerful thighs.

"Well ribbed up, too, is he not, Geoffrey?" asked the Colonel. "For a horse of his height, I do not remember to have seen a better shape."

Geoffrey assented, without the slightest idea of what "well-

ribbed up" meant. To him, the grey did not appear at all beautiful. His neck was too straight, his legs were too thick, and altogether he was not the sort of animal to cut a dash with. And such a height, too! What a job it must be to get on his back, and how awkward if he would not stand still!

"Is he not very high?" he ventured to ask.

"He is," answered the Colonel. "Sixteen two; but, in my opinion, a good big one is better than a good little one. The only difficulty is to get the good big one. Now, this horse is as near thorough-bred as possible."

"Indeed?" asked Geoffrey, feeling himself on firmer ground. "Who is his sire?"

"Snowstorm," replied the Colonel; "dam by See Saw."

"Let me see," said Geoffrey, reflectively, "Snowstorm won the Stewards' Cup in 1865, I think, and of course See Saw was a great horse. Won several races at Ascot as a three-year-old, and always ran game even when he was beaten."

"Precisely," answered the Colonel, delighted. "I see you know all about it, my boy. It's a pleasure to show you a horse. I should like to see you on a nag like this, piloting them all over the Bankshire country."

A glow of genuine pleasure made Geoffrey blush. That would indeed be a proud thing to do, and there might possibly be triumphs in the hunting-field as sweet as those at the green table. But then there was the danger! He might fall off, and break something. The glow subsided.

"This, strictly speaking, should be your special horse," remarked Neville, as they stood by the side of a strong looking but somewhat ragged brown—one of those animals whom a tyro or a woman would, as a rule, put down as a "horrid thing;" a large head, a Roman nose, lop ears, high withers, hip bones you could almost hang your hat on, and drooping quarters, did not make up an attractive picture.

"What an ugly brute!" was Geoffrey's remark. "Why should he be mine?"

"Tom Kirk bought him from one of your tenants near Castle Clare," replied the Colonel. "He went over to look

after things for me a few months ago, and picked up old Patrick at the time. He's a wonderfully clever animal."

"You can ride him with the most entire confidence," remarked Mr. Kirk. "I am not what you would call a hard man myself. I hate jumping, and only go out to improve my digestion; but, upon my honour, I would not mind riding Patrick through a fast run with the Bankshire. I know I should be tired long before he was."

"He is not handsome, though," persisted Geoffrey. "Ugly as sin."

"I do not quite agree with you," said the Colonel. "If beauty means fitness for work to be done, he is the best looking horse in the stable. What do *you* think of Patrick, Wraggles?" asked the Colonel, turning to the groom.

"'Andsome is as 'andsome does, sir," replied Wraggles, touching his forelock. "A first-rate 'un, I call him, and never off his feed for a hour, sir, whatever time he comes home."

"There you have an absolutely unbiassed opinion," said Tom Kirk. "They gave this horse such an excellent character in Ireland, and he was so well known as 'the foinest hunting horse entirely' within ten miles of Castle Clare, that I had no hesitation in buying him on the advice of the neighbours."

"And a very good bargain you made, Tom," said the Colonel. But Geoffrey was not convinced. Patrick might be a useful horse, but how a man so wealthy as the Colonel, who could have bought the finest horse in England, could be seen riding about on such a brute as that, was what he could not understand.

"Now for your mare, Mr. Clare," said Mr. Kirk, crossing the yard. "You can ride, of course?"

"Just a little," answered Geoffrey, with conscious pride.

"All right, then," continued Tom, lowering his voice, and looking round to see whether the Colonel was out of hearing; "you see, she is not quite easy to get on with. The Colonel just thinks her perfection, only she's hardly up to his weight; but she wants a man on her back, in my opinion."

"Then he does not know much about it?" asked Geoffrey eagerly.

"Bless your heart, he knows nothing about her," replied Mr. Kirk, mistaking the drift of the question; "he rode her once with hounds, and she carried him beautifully, so he puts her down as perfection; but I do not trust her a bit. Hush! here he comes."

Geoffrey was delighted! After all, then, on his own friend's showing, the Colonel was a bit of a humbug, and perhaps could not ride at all. Some people are only great by reason of others being small, and in his own estimation Geoffrey had suddenly become a great rider because he gathered from Mr. Kirk that his guardian was not one.

"Amberwitch" certainly pleased him better than Patrick, though the way she laid her ears back and showed the whites of her eyes was not reassuring.

"Mind, sir; she lifts a bit," was Mr. Wraggles' remark, and Geoffrey jumped back just in time to avoid a lively pair of heels.

"It's only her fun; she is too fresh. We ought to give her a canter this afternoon, Wraggles," observed Colonel Neville.

"You ought, indeed, Colonel," replied Wraggles.

"What say you to a ride, Geoffrey? Will you try her?"

Now Geoffrey was mindful of Mr. Kirk's warning, and did not feel very sure of his horsemanship. Still, he was exceedingly anxious to please his guardian, for reasons already known to the reader, and did not like showing the white feather. So he boldly said:

"All right, sir; I'm game. Of course you will come?"

"Of course. Get Hailstorm ready for me, Wraggles, and Mr. Geoffrey will ride the mare. Of course you will come, Kirk?"

The Colonel's toilette was soon made. Both he and Kirk habitually wore gaiters, and therefore were always ready either for a ride or for a country walk; but Geoffrey was longer in his preparations. It was nearly half an hour before he came down, elaborately dressed in another suit of dittoes, with tight-fitting trousers strapped down, small patent leather boots, and a pair of thin, sharp, Park spurs screwed into the heels.

Fortunately for himself, he met Mr. Kirk in the hall. That gentleman looked him all over quickly, but carefully.

"Take off those spurs at once, Mr. Clare," he said, hurriedly. "The mare won't bear them."

"But I always wear them," answered Geoffrey, flicking the polished toe of his boot with his gorgeously-mounted whalebone riding-whip. "I am used to them."

"But *she* is not. Take them off at once, I say, or you'll be killed. Don't be an ass, now. Do as I tell you."

This was said in so imperative a tone, that the blood rushed to Geoffrey's face. He was being treated like an ignorant schoolboy, while he was, in truth, a full-grown sportsman. But Mr. Kirk's face looked so determined, that he did not dare to do more than murmur, "Oh! I shall get on well enough."

"You'll be off in a brace of shakes, you young fool," said Tom, quite angrily. "Now, sit down there. I'll help you."

In a moment Mr. Kirk had removed one spur, and soon Geoffrey had also unfastened the other. Kirk calmly took possession of them.

"Now go on," he said, "and mind what you're about. Keep quiet, and don't fidget her."

"Ready?" asked the Colonel, who was pulling on his gloves under the porch. "You get on first, Tom, please. How about the stirrups, Geoffrey? I don't think much of your London tailor, as far as riding dress goes. You must get a stronger suit than that. Why, the first shower will take off its bloom, and the first hedge will tear it. Mind, now!"

This exclamation was produced by the mare giving a playful kick with both heels before Geoffrey was well in the saddle.

"Steady, Mr. Clare, steady," said Kirk. "Drop the curb, and take up the snaffle. Gently, mare. So ho—so ho, old girl."

The Colonel now came up, and the party proceeded steadily. As long as she was walking between the two other horses, Amberwitch went quietly enough, so that Geoffrey gradually regained confidence, set his hat straight, re-arranged his tie, and even thought of lighting a cigar. But he felt that the present calm was only a truce: that he was riding on sufferance, and that the mare might burst out at any moment; so he abstained. They turned from the park gates down a lane,

and soon reached the Home Farm, where the conversation took an agricultural turn, which bored him intensely, particularly while his attention was entirely taken up with his horse. She followed the others through gates willingly enough, and was easy to pull up when they stopped; but when Colonel Neville and Mr. Kirk began to trot along the side of a field, the mare burst into a short, high canter, which jerked her rider painfully, and which he was unable to check. It was all very well for Neville to say, "Don't pull at her, Geoffrey; she has a very light mouth!" and for Mr. Kirk to exclaim, "Don't worry her! Drop the curb!" The moment he did so she plunged wildly forward, gave two vicious kicks, and the canter became a gallop. She carried him swiftly away from the others, and they knew better than to gallop after him. At first he tried to check her with the snaffle, as he had been told; but as this proved quite useless, he took up the curb, and, much to his delight, succeeded in pulling her up just before they reached the further fence.

"She's a little fresh to-day," remarked the Colonel, riding up.

"Very, I think," gasped Geoffrey, still panting from his exertions.

Amberwitch was snorting and throwing the foam about in flecks as she jerked her head up. It was clear that there was little sympathy between herself and her rider, and one who could have read her thoughts would have seen in that broad forehead a firm resolve to get rid of the obnoxious individual as soon as possible. Horses can form designs as well as men, and though they may be less elaborate than some human schemes, they are sometimes as difficult to defeat.

"The lad manages to stick on, somehow," said Tom Kirk to himself, "but he can't ride a bit, and has no more hands than a tree."

"Let us go on quietly for a while," suggested the Colonel. "The mare will soon settle down."

But she did not. Her short burst had made her keen for more, and she did not like her rider any better on a longer acquaintance. No exertions on his part would now induce her

to walk. Either she sidled along crosswise, snorting, and pulling at the bridle, or she jogged impatiently, with an occasional kick. Having left the Home Farm, they were now heading towards Wrottesmoor, a wide breezy down on the confines of which Mr. Snow farmed a few hundred acres. At intervals Amberwitch lifted her head to the breeze, and pricked her ears; perhaps she was listening for the music of hounds, or wondering when she would hear the huntsman's horn.

"Shall we have a canter across the common?" asked the Colonel. "Perhaps that will take it out of her."

"Perhaps it would," thought Geoffrey, who was getting tired. At any rate on the common there would be no hedges in the way, and she might gallop till she, too, had had enough of it. So they only skirted Snow's farm, and soon their horses' feet trod the short firm turf of the downs. Tom Kirk gave his sturdy cob his head, and the Colonel put Hailstorm into a gentle canter. Hailstorm, too, became excited, and threw up his head anxious to have a breather. But the mare broke away with a frantic rush while Geoffrey was still unprepared, and in about a minute they were sailing over the downs a quarter of a mile in front of the other two. "I'll let her go," thought Geoffrey, "there is nothing in the way, and she will soon pull up of herself. It is of no use fagging myself out by tugging at her." This was a sound opinion, but unfortunately based on insufficient premises. The mare did not soon pull up. Geoffrey calculated on her dropping into a canter long before they reached the top of the hill; but he was mistaken. The longer she galloped the faster she seemed to go, and the gentle ascent did not cause her to slacken the pace one bit. Geoffrey was already out of breath. As long as they were going up hill it was all right; but when Amberwitch had mounted the hill and galloped down the other side, which was much steeper, with increased speed, the youth became very nervous. His arms were tired, and he could only gasp. Late hours at Monte Carlo are not conducive to good condition. His limbs refused to obey, and he was unable to sit well back, as he knew that he ought to do when riding fast down hill. With some trouble he managed to take a rapid glance

over his shoulder. There was a dot on the top of the hill, ever so far behind. Evidently either Colonel Neville or Mr. Kirk was riding after him—but at what a distance! How could either of them help? Like most downs the descent grew steeper towards the bottom, and Geoffrey felt himself entirely at the mercy of the mare. He could just manage to stick on somehow, at the cost of being horribly shaken about; but he could not guide her, much less check her. Should he try and slip off? A glance at the turf, which seemed to fly backwards under the chestnut's hoofs, told him that this would be a very difficult thing to manage. Before him was the valley, and at last they neared it. On the opposite side the down rose again, still more steeply, and surely he would be able to pull the mare up on this next hill. Even now he thought she was going more slowly and heavier. But Geoffrey again reckoned without sufficient knowledge. Pricking up her ears suddenly the mare dashed forward as fast as she could, and the next moment Geoffrey felt himself flying through the air, and saw under him a wide chasm with a small stream of water trickling down it. The banks were steep, and he had not seen it till the mare rose, and it was too late to think. One confused struggle, one snatch at the mane, and Geoffrey found himself lying on the grass. He sat up and gazed about him stupidly. He saw his hat a few yards off on the other side of the ditch: his whip near him, on the turf; Amberwitch cantering on gaily, but now only cantering, towards the hill. He was not in the least hurt, for he felt himself all over and could detect no pains nor aches. When he had arrived at this satisfactory conclusion he said, "Confound the beast!" and looked back to the other hill. There came the grey, almost end on to him, the Colonel sitting perfectly upright in his saddle, his face set, his hands well down, and his knees grasping his horse as in a vice. When Geoffrey looked at him he waved his right hand and smiled, then with a "Hold up, old man!" flew across the chasm a few yards from where the mare had jumped it. "Are you hurt, Geoffrey?" shouted he, as he gently reined up Hailstorm.

"Not a bit, sir; only a little stupid."

"He fell anyhow."

"Thank Heaven! But are you quite sure?" asked the Colonel again, as he jumped off the grey, and passing one arm through the snaffle-rein approached the youth, who had now risen to his feet.

"There's nothing the matter," replied Geoffrey, who felt a little ashamed of himself, and thought that, after all, he ought to have been able to keep his seat over a jump which the Colonel had taken with such ease. "The mare is very difficult to hold."

"So it seems. I ought not to have put you on her. I suppose she was fresher than I thought. She has not had half work enough. Here is your whip! I'm thankful it's no worse," he added, brushing the dust off Geoffrey's coat. "I'm awfully sorry, my boy. I ought to have known better."

Geoffrey was touched at the 'old boy's' serious anxiety. In fact, now everything was over, the Colonel looked the more agitated of the two. "Good God," he exclaimed, "I would never have got over it if you had been hurt, Geoffrey!"

A sudden thought flashed through the lad's brain. He would take advantage of the Colonel's soft mood. Now, if ever, was the time to ask for that money.

"I was not thinking about the mare much," he said, "or I should have held her. I am awfully worried about other matters."

"Worried! what about? There can be nothing to worry you?" asked the Colonel, anxiously.

"Well," answered Geoffrey, affecting an emotion he hardly felt, "I owe some money and I don't quite know how to pay."

"Owe money? Was not your allowance enough?"

"I am afraid not," replied the lad, looking down.

"Never mind. All right, Geoffrey. How much do you want?—a couple of hundred?"

"A little more, sir."

"Well, speak up. You shall have it. It will be yours by-and-by, anyhow: and you're not the first young man that has got into a scrape."

"Five hundred, sir," replied Geoffrey, bringing out the words with effort, but afraid to mention the real amount.

"Five hundred! I'm sorry for it. But never mind, you shall have a cheque to-night."

"What are you fellows talking about?" came a cheery voice from the other side of the ditch. "There's the chestnut calmly grazing on that hill a mile off; there's Mr. Clare's hat on the wrong side of the water, and you seem to take no more heed than if you were in the smoking-room. You're not hurt, I hope, Clare?"

"Not a bit," answered the Colonel, cheerfully. "Bring that hat over, Tom, and I'll ride after the mare. Then Geoffrey can get on Hailstorm if he likes. We ought to move towards home; it's getting late."

"How am I to bring the hat over?" asked Kirk. "You know I hate jumping. Besides, this is a regular *nullah*. The cob can't do it, and his master won't."

"Nonsense, Tom. Put him at it straight and he will carry you over well enough. But pick up the hat first," replied the Colonel.

"I would not try to jump it at any time," replied Kirk. "I should only break my neck. It will be time enough to do that when I can no longer enjoy my dinner. I shall ride round by the bridge."

"Why, it's nearly a mile each way," said the Colonel.

"Never mind. You just go after the mare. By the time you've got her I shall be round, and we can go home through Camberleigh on to the Bancaster Road. That will be the shortest from here."

"All right," said the Colonel. "You stop here quietly, Geoffrey, and smoke a cigar. Will you hold Hailstorm for me? Thank you. I'll bring the mare back in no time." With these words he jumped up, and in a minute was concealed from sight by a dip in the hill side.

"Now," said Mr. Kirk, slowly drawing his right leg over the cob's withers, "(stand still, you fool), I'll get your hat."

Very solemnly Mr. Tom picked up the hat, and approached the edge of the ravine. He peered over it.

"The cob cannot scramble down there and up again," he observed, after examining the place. "It is impossible."

"Quite," said Geoffrey, who had approached from the other side. "It's a beastly place." Meanwhile the cob, trained to stand still, was calmly nibbling the short sweet grass.

"Clare!" exclaimed Mr. Kirk.

"Yes, Mr. Kirk," answered Geoffrey.

"Can I trust you?"

"Of course. What's up?"

"Honour bright?"

"On my honour," replied the lad.

"You won't tell?"

"Certainly not," answered Geoffrey, wondering what was coming.

"Very well; I'll trust you. Here goes." And Mr. Kirk whistled to the cob, who came trotting up. His owner got into the saddle very leisurely, and turned away from the ditch the same way he had come.

"How on earth am I to keep the secret that he has ridden away?" thought Geoffrey, puzzled. "Why the man must be a fool. I wish he had not taken my hat, too!"

But in a moment his astonishment increased; for Mr. Kirk pulled up, turned the cob round, and chirrupping to the strong, well-made animal, came lolloping back to the ditch at a slow canter, with Geoffrey's hat still in his hand. "Look out," he cried, and bounded across the ravine, landing at the opposite side with six feet to spare. He held out the hat to Geoffrey, saying:

"You gave me your word, you know. It's a dead secret."

"But why?" inquired the youth.

"My boy, if the governor thought I could jump anything, I should have no peace. I should be obliged to go tearing after hounds over all the hedges and ditches in the country, instead of enjoying myself quietly, and chatting with the ladies. So you just hold your tongue, will you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Kirk," replied Geoffrey, admiringly. "What a wonderful cob that is!"

"Not a bad one, by any means. He cost money enough, anyhow. He was the prize jumper at Suffield show last year."

"Oh!" said Geoffrey.

"Yes; he can jump anything. But they don't know it, and they shan't, if I can help it."

"Hallo!" cried a voice from the hill side. "You've got round very quickly, Tom! How did you manage?"

"The cob is smart enough," replied Mr. Kirk, quietly.

"Here's the mare, Geoff. She's quiet now, I think. Will you ride her home, or will you try Hailstorm? Or shall Kirk lend you the cob?"

"I'll stick to the mare," replied Geoffrey, summoning up his courage.

"That's right, my boy," said the Colonel, well pleased; "now let's get on. But I say, Tom, how did you manage it? It was impossible to get round in that time!"

"I found an easy place to scramble through," answered Tom Kirk. "The cob is smart, you know."

"He is, very," said the Colonel and Geoffrey together.

And they rode home without further incident.

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CHAPTER VII.

A BIT OF COPING.

"The mare will not suit young Mr. Clare," remarked Mr. Kirk to the Colonel, at the first opportunity.

"He rides well enough," said Colonel Neville, standing up for his darling.

"Oh, well, he can ride, I suppose, but he has not much experience, you know, and Amberwitch is a hot-headed thing. She might very likely bring him to grief."

"Do you really think so?" asked the Colonel, startled, for the possibility of a more serious accident than that of the afternoon had not, in fact, suggested itself to him.

"Certainly. By-and-by no doubt he will be able to ride her as well as any one. But for the present he ought to have a couple of quiet clever quads."

"Can we find one for him?"

"One?" replied Mr. Kirk. "I will engage to find a dozen of the sort in a week! The appearance is of little consequence. What we want is the sort of beast a fellow can practise on—a knowing screw, for choice, because it does not matter if the beast *does* go lame when the lad has learned to ride a better one."

"Well, we will tell him," said the Colonel. "I am sure he will be delighted."

But after dinner, when the Colonel opened up the subject, Geoffrey was not at all delighted. He did not care about riding horses selected by Mr. Kirk. He was not going to be Mr. Kirk's pupil and humble servant. This Mr. Kirk was, in fact, altogether unpleasant to him. He had not been able to follow half the conversation during dinner. The Colonel's occasional sallies and Tom's half serious, half comic remarks were more or less unintelligible. It dawned upon him that he was being laughed at for tumbling off Amberwitch, for wearing a single stud of enormous size and dazzling appearance, for the occa-

sional use of slang which the two "fossils," as he thought them, did not quite understand. He had taken enough wine to be a little excited, and he was not in the humour to be laughed at any more by Mr. Kirk, nor to be treated like a schoolboy home for his holidays by Colonel Neville. Therefore when the latter said, pleasantly, that he had asked Mr. Kirk to look out for a horse for him, Geoffrey replied :—

"Thank you, Colonel Neville. Mr. Kirk need not trouble himself."

"Oh! it is no trouble to him at all," said the Colonel, *naïvely:* "he is very good, and it is a pleasure to him to oblige us."

"I would rather buy my own horses, if you have no objection," said Geoffrey, sulkily, and scowling at Mr. Kirk.

The latter rose slowly from the table and sauntered out of the room. He was evidently of no use there, and might do harm. He had better leave the two together. Flushed with wine, Geoffrey went on :

"I should like to know, sir, on what footing I am to be treated. Do you wish me to stop here altogether? We may as well settle it at once."

The Colonel stared, as much surprised at his tone as at the words. But he answered, quietly :

"You know, Geoffrey, that by your father's will and your uncle's, I am your guardian till you are of age, and that I am to take care of the estate a little longer—till you are twenty-five, in fact. It therefore only appears natural that, for the present, at least, you should stay chiefly in my house. There is no convenient one on your Bankshire property. You don't want to set up house at Castle Clare yet, I presume?"

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Geoffrey, who thought Ireland a wild country of bogs, and its inhabitants savages.

"Of course you must go there occasionally, and I hope that between us we shall be able to improve the place. But I certainly thought that you would have no objection to keeping me company here for a few years. Of course you will be entirely your own master," added he, hastily, seeing a frown in Geoffrey's face.

"But surely I am not *always* to be here?" asked the young man, whom the prospect of being "snowed up" in the country did not tempt, gilded though it might be by full liberty to do as he pleased.

"No, Geoffrey," replied the Colonel. "I have already spoken of Castle Clare. It is absolutely necessary that *I* should go there to look after your interests and your tenants, and I supposed that you would gladly come for the same purpose."

The young man felt that he was getting the worst of the argument. His Dutch courage was fast sinking, and discretion took its place. He had not yet received that cheque for five hundred, though it had been promised, and he was a little curious as to what the Colonel meant by saying that he should be "his own master." So he muttered an unwilling assent, and his guardian went on to tell him that three rooms in the west wing should be placed entirely at his disposal, and that he should have his own valet and his own groom. Then he asked Geoffrey to follow him into the library, and handed him the amount promised.

When this was also settled the youth felt nearly grateful, and expressed his thanks as heartily as he could.

"Now about these horses, Geoffrey," said the Colonel. "Do you think you can trust your own judgment?"

"Of course I can, sir. I am not likely to make any mistake."

"I hope not. But I should advise you to be careful. Dealers are a queer lot, as a rule."

"I won't go to a dealer," replied Geoffrey. "I know a lot of riding fellows, and I should get a horse from one or other of them on the Q. T."

"Worse still," thought the Colonel. But he did not say so. He did not wish to oppose the young man in what, after all, was not a matter of great importance.

"Well," he said, "try your own judgment, by all means. I think for about seventy or eighty you ought to get just the nag to carry you well."

"I'll get two for that money," thought Geoffrey.

"And," continued the Colonel, "where do you propose buying a horse?"

"In London, of course," replied the youth, with a "spree" in view.

But Geoffrey was not quite so confident of his powers as he pretended to be. Even as he spoke it dawned on him that he might make a mistake, and that then Mr. Tom Kirk's laughter would indeed be unpleasant. So far, he had relied on his friends Mr. Weevil and Captain Templar. But they were now at Monaco, and he could scarcely recall them by telegraph to buy him a horse. Besides, he flattered himself that he really did know something about it. So it was soon arranged that he should go up to town on the following Saturday morning, should look round at the dealers' stables, and at the "Corner," and return on Monday evening. The Colonel would fain have gone with him. But Geoffrey's anxiety to run alone was so very marked, that, blinded as was his guardian by his affection, he could not make a mistake on this point.

So behold our hero, attired in his loudest suit of dittoes, starting for town with a handsome cheque in his pocket, besides the one which the Colonel had given him on the day of their first ride. Never had the young man felt so much inclined to enjoy himself, and never before had he possessed such ample means for doing so. It is true that the bills he had signed far exceeded in amount the sum which Colonel Neville had given him; but Geoffrey thought that so handsome a payment on account would induce his financier, as he called him, to allow a renewal for a lengthened period. Having deposited his luggage at a fashionable hotel, and exchanged his travelling clothes for a town dress, with an excruciatingly handsome top coat, silk-faced and velvet-collared, he sallied forth to Tattersall's. Looking down the catalogue, he rejoiced over the number of horses which, according to the owners' description, would exactly answer his purpose. "Good hunter," "fine fencer," "well known in the Vale country," and other seductive particulars seemed to promise that he would only have the difficulty of selection among a number of good ones. He resolved to

proceed systematically, and began at the nearest stable, with a complete stud, "the property of a nobleman who declines hunting in consequence of an accident." Either the gorgeousness of his coat, the glossiness of his hat, the brilliancy of the flower in his button-hole, or the *tout ensemble*, attracted the attention of one of the numerous horsey-looking individuals who were loafing about the yard. When Geoffrey came out of the stall of one of the highly recommended steeds, this person respectfully touched his hat, as if recognising a distinguished personage. Geoffrey, who was a little puzzled by the number of animals, and after looking at half-a-dozen could not have described the points of any one of them, thought that it would be wise to get a little help, and at once asked the man whether he was in charge of the horses?

"Not exactly, sir," replied he; "but I knows every one of 'em."

"You were in the stable, I suppose?" inquired Geoffrey, determining to be very clever, and to find out all about them from one who knew the secrets.

"Yes, sir; and I knows 'em all as if they was my own. What sort of a horse do you please to want, sir? A 'unter, or an 'ack?"

"Well, I want a couple of really good hunters," answered Geoffrey, producing half-a-crown, which he handed to the man, "and if you put me on a real good one, I'll remember it to you."

"Thank ye, kindly, sir," said the man, pocketing the coin. "Now, what do you say to this 'ere bay? His Grace was perticklar fond of this bay, before he met with his sad accident."

"His Grace!" thought Geoffrey. Then the horses belonged to a Duke! What good luck! Of course it would argue gross ignorance on his part if he were to ask His Grace's name. Everybody is naturally supposed to know it when a Duke sells his stud.

"Ah! yes," said he. "I understood that the Duke was going to sell all the nags. Badly hurt, was he not?"

"Werry, sir, werry bad," answered the man, putting on a melancholy look. "I doubt whether His Grace will ever be able to ride again. Axing your parding, sir, but p'raps I am

making a mistake. I fancies, somehow, I've seen you at the Castle. Maybe I ought to have said my lord?"

Geoffrey felt highly flattered, and blushed with pleasure.

"No, no," he said. "You're all right. I'm only plain Mister. But tell me about this bay, now. How old is he?"

"Rising seven, sir; the werry best age for an 'orse. Like to look into his mouth?"

It is a very easy thing to tell a horse's age approximately from his teeth, if they have not been tampered with; but poor

Geoffrey could not have distinguished an aged mare from a yearling colt. Still, he thought it incumbent upon him to knock his hat off in the endeavour to squint into the animal's mouth, who strongly objected to the process, probably with a vivid recollection of a very unpleasant filing and marking which had been carried on a few days before. And the youth considered it knowing to say:

"Rather over seven, is he not? Eight, I should say."

"Begging your parden, sir," replied the man, who had by this time discovered that he was dealing with a very green hand. "He was bred at the Castle, got by Evergreen from a favourite mare of the Dook's. *I ought* to know the 'orse's age. He were

foaled seven years ago come next Easter. 'Ave 'im out, sir; 'ave him out, and see his action."

"Why don't you trot him out yourself?" asked Geoffrey, seeing his friend signal to one of the authorised helpers.

"We ain't allowed, sir. We ain't allowed to lead horses out, nor to wear no livery, nor nothink. Lord, sir, if we was to come down in proper dress, the other common folks wouldn't have no chance to sell their 'orses."

By this time the cloths were stripped off the bay, and he was led out for Geoffrey's delectation. A big, strapping horse he was, with marks of the iron on the off hind leg, curby hocks, and straight shoulders. But he appeared to go sound enough in the yard, and he carried his head and "flag" well, which pleased Geoffrey. Still, the lad was not an absolute idiot, and though he did notice the suspicious hocks, the horse did not quite satisfy him. He said to the man:

"He seems a fine horse, but he's not quite my style."

"Well, sir," answered the fellow, at once following the lead, "he is not quite a young gentleman's horse—more the sort of animal for a nobleman as wants to go quiet. But I can see, sir, that you requires a horse that can go, and you don't mind it if he should want a little riding."

"Not a bit," said Geoffrey, proudly.

"That's your style!" exclaimed the man. "A gentleman of your age, light weight and all, should ride nothing but blood, real blood. Now, sir, let me show you an 'orse that'll suit you exactly."

Geoffrey followed his guide to another stable, where he was shown a leggy dark brown—one of the horses specially created as "flatcatchers." When this beast was trotted out, a smile lighted up the young man's face. That was something like a hunter! Free sloping shoulders, a small head, thin neck, tail well set on, a coat which glistened in the pale rays of the February sun, and evidently quiet and manageable. He did not notice that the horse had very light bones, that his feet were bad, and his action cow-like.

"This is not one of the Duke's?" asked he.

"No, sir. This belongs to a neighbour of his, who rides too heavy for 'im. Just your style of 'orse, sir. Look at the breeding! There's fashion for you! He'd have won the Derby, that horse would, if he had been entered, and if they were to run him for the Liverpool next month, he d stand a precious good chance!"

"Can he jump?"

"Jump, sir! Bless your life, there's nothing that will stop him, and do it all so quiet and easy like, he will. Carry you like an armchair over anythink."

"I suppose there's a reserve on him?" asked Geoffrey.

"In course there is, sir, but it ain't nothing to hurt anyone. Fifty pounds is what the governor wants for him, and fifty guineas will have to be bid on Monday, or he'll go back home. But of course he'll fetch twice that money: no fear."

Geoffrey was more and more fascinated with the brown, the more he looked at him. He was certainly a handsome beast; well bred enough, probably without a stain in his pedigree, and if sound he might have carried nine stone to hounds brilliantly. At the auction he might lose him. So he ventured a question.

"I suppose you would not sell the horse before Monday?"

"Well, sir," replied the man, "it ain't usual. And at Tattersall's it ain't allowed, not as a rule, leastwise. But you know if the owner chooses to withdraw him, there ain't any one as can prevent it."

"Where is the owner? What's his name?" asked Geoffrey.

"He ain't here now, sir, but I think I could find him at his Club," answered the man, ignoring the second question: "if so be as you've taken a fancy to the 'orse."

"I'll go and call on him, if you will tell me the Club," said Geoffrey.

"Better let me go, sir. I might not find him at one place, so I'd have to look elsewhere. I'll soon bring him back in a hansom to you, sir."

Geoffrey produced another half-crown. "Very well. Be off. I'll wait here an hour, and look at the other horses. After that I shall go away, so be sharp, if your master really wants to sell."

"There's a man 'ere, sir," said the loafer, "that was in the

Dook's stable many years. He knows most of the horses that are up to-day; and he'll show you round if you please, while I'm away."

"All right," said Geoffrey, who did not particularly admire the gentleman he was thus introduced to—a seedy-looking individual in a rusty stable suit, who had evidently at no time attained the air of respectability which was so distinguishing a characteristic of Geoffrey's first friend. The latter left the yard hurriedly, and Geoffrey began sucking his crutch-stick while listening to the man's voluble praise of another horse—not at Tattersall's this time, but in the Brompton Road, just round the corner. Eventually, Geoffrey was persuaded to follow the man just to have a look at the animal, and walked towards the entrance, when he saw a well-known face entering the gate.

"Halloa, Templar!" he cried, "I thought you were at Monte Carlo?"

"Halloa, Clare!" was the answer. "I thought you were down in Bankshire."

The two friends shook hands warmly. Perhaps, of the two, Geoffrey was the more pleased at the unexpected meeting. Templar had a faint idea that he might be asked to repay a portion of the money he had borrowed so freely from the young man: the latter was simply rejoiced to find his trusted adviser and boon companion.

"What brings you up here, old man?" asked Templar.

"To buy horses," answered Geoffrey.

"To buy horses? Then has the old gentleman stumped up?"

"Rather."

"Come over to the Red House to lunch, and tell me all about it," said Templar, sniffing more money in the air.

"First, I want to go with this fellow to look at a horse," said Geoffrey.

"Which fellow?" asked the Captain.

Geoffrey turned round to point him out; but the man had disappeared, probably unwilling to face a person who knew as much about him as Captain Templar.

"Why, he's gone!" exclaimed Geoffrey.

"Very likely some coper! Probably he knew me, and was

afraid of me," remarked Templar. "Most of these chaps know that they must not try their tricks on me, nor on any of *my* friends," he added, proudly.

"Well," said Geoffrey, "I didn't particularly like his looks. But there's a brown horse here I should like you to see. The groom is gone to find the owner—some swell, I believe. I'm very much inclined to buy him."

"Oh! leave the horse till after lunch!" exclaimed Templar, impatient to find out whether the young man was worth handling carefully, or whether he had better get all he could out of him at once and have done with it.

"No," said Geoffrey, "I promised to wait here. But I should be glad if you'd give me your opinion of him. I think I might get him for sixty guineas or some trifle of that sort."

"Whew!" whistled the Captain, who was surprised at the airy way in which Geoffrey talked of sixty guineas. "Let's see the animal then."

Soon, the brown was brought out to be submitted to the Captain's scrutiny. He did not take long making up his mind. He passed his hands quickly down the knees and forelegs, looked into his mouth, and then said briefly to the man, "Take him back," and seizing Geoffrey by the arm, almost dragged him from the yard. The latter submitted with an ill-grace, and pressed the Captain with questions, which the latter would not answer till they were close to the gates.

"My dear fellow," he then said, "I wasn't going to talk with that crowd of cads round me to hear every word. Now, come in here, and I'll tell you all about the brown. I thought I knew him, but I looked at him closely to make sure. That's an old broken-down steeple-chaser," continued he, when the two had sat down at a little table in the Red House, "that's been the round of all the auctions in London for the last couple of years. He's gone in both forelegs, he can't raise more than a trot, he'd fall down after a ten minutes' gallop if he had more than ten stone to carry, he's got shelly bad feet, he can't keep a shoe more than an hour, and he's not worth five pounds."

Geoffrey was confounded. "But he's handsome," he said at last.

"A handsome flatcatcher you mean? Well, in a way, he is handsome. I don't blame you, you know," said the Captain, quickly, seeing that Geoffrey looked hurt. "Anybody might be taken in by that horse, if he were not an experienced hand. But I've saved you from a very queer bargain. Does your governor know anything about horses?"

"I think so," answered the youth; "he seems to ride very well, and he's fond of them."

"Then you may depend upon it, Clare, you were devilish lucky to run across me to-day. Either he'd have blown you up sky-high, or he'd have laughed at you for weeks, if you had brought that beast home."

"But what shall I say to the owner, when he comes back?" asked Geoffrey, plaintively. "I almost promised to buy him."

"Let him go to the devil!" replied Templar. "It's some low coper that's got him."

"No," answered the youth, "it's a relation of the Duke's."

"Which Duke's?"

"Oh, I don't know. The Duke whose horses are being sold."

"There's no Duke selling on Monday, that I know of," said Templar.

"But the groom said so," persisted Geoffrey.

"Oh, Clare!" exclaimed Templar, laughing, "you're too good for this wicked world, you are really. Some infernal loafer has been spinning yarns, and you've sucked them all down like rum and milk. Never mind, old man, cheer up! You can't expect to know everything before you're twenty-one. Only you may be thankful that you've got a friend to give you a straight tip now and then."

"I am, indeed," answered Geoffrey, feeling genuinely grateful.

And now, as the lunch was brought, he told the Captain of his guardian's liberality, and what he proposed to do with the money. Then he asked Templar why he had left Monte Carlo so soon?

The latter did not exactly tell him that as the person who supplied the funds had gone, Monte Carlo had no more charms

for himself and Mr. Weevil. He put the case rather differently. He said that they found it so deuced dull without their friend that they packed up their traps and came straight home two days after his departure. Naturally, Geoffrey felt more bound to the Captain than ever after this confession.

"Now," proceeded that officer, "you want a couple of horses, and you want to see Flatman about the bills?"

"Yes," said Geoffrey, "I was thinking of going up to Flatman's office now. But I've only been there once, with you and Weevil, and, to tell the truth——"

"You are a little nervous about it, old chappie?"

"That's it. But if you'll come along with me ——"

"Why not? Of course I will. We'll have a bottle of fiz between us, and then we'll take a hansom up. He's not at all a bad fellow, isn't Flatman. But I don't think he'd have done that bit of paper if Weevil and I had not got up behind."

"I don't suppose he would," said Geoffrey, who really believed that the solvency of his two friends had helped him to the money.

"But I don't know whether we can do it again," said the Captain. "It's risky work, you know. You promised to get the lot out of the old man."

"I'm paying off half. I couldn't get more. Don't leave me in the lurch, Templar, for heaven's sake."

"Well, we'll see what Flatman says. Now about the horses. I'll try and find what you want on Monday." The Captain was not the man to lose so promising and useful a friend as young Clare for the sake of twenty or twenty-five pounds he might make by selling him a useless screw. He made the offer in good faith in so far as he intended to do the best he could for Geoffrey, subject of course to a commission from the seller of the quadruped, which the youth need know nothing about. The arrangements for Monday and the horses having been discussed, Templar said:

"Shall we go on? Are you going to pay? Right. Then let us call a hansom. Two hundred and three, Cork Street, cabby."

CHAPTER VIII.

DOGS.

MR FLATMAN was, of course, not a money-lender. He only acted for other persons, and had no capital of his own. By profession he was a solicitor, and no one had yet applied to have his name struck off the rolls. To all outward appearances the office and all pertaining to it were entirely respectable. Things were even more than merely respectable—they were almost attractive, if anything could ever make a solicitor's office attractive. The outer room was, indeed, encumbered by many bundles of papers and numerous tin boxes, grimy and dusty; but the sanctum into which Captain Templar and Geoffrey were ushered, after a very short wait, was very different. There was a thick soft carpet on the floor, in fair condition; etchings and pictures hung on the well-papered walls, two inviting armchairs

stood near the stove, and there was an air of comfort about the place which by no means suggested any process of the law, nor the numerous disagreeable matters which occasionally had to be discussed within the double doors securing the entrance.

Mr. Flatman rose to receive them; welcomed both heartily, and placing Geoffrey in the armchair facing the window, and Templar in the opposite one, he resumed his revolving office chair, on which he turned to the former with the polite question—

"What can I do for you, Mr. Clare? This is really an unexpected pleasure. I did not expect to see you till—let me see, the thirteenth of the month, and it is now only the sixth."

What light there was on that February afternoon in London fell full on Geoffrey's face, while the other two were entirely in shadow. The lad blushed, and hesitated, so good Captain Templar came to his rescue.

"Mr. Clare has come about those bills which are due next week," said he. "He is able to suggest some arrangement which I think will induce your people to renew."

A quick glance flashed from Mr. Flatman's black eyes, and was responded to by an almost imperceptible wink from Templar.

The solicitor suavely said, "I shall be glad to hear anything our young friend has to suggest, Captain Templar. But you must be aware that another renewal is an awkward thing to ask for. It was distinctly understood, I believe, that these bills were to be taken up when due, and that if Mr. Clare was unable to do so, you would pay the amount, or your other friend—let me see, what is his name? Weazle? no, Weevil! precisely."

Templar seemed uncomfortable—at least, Geoffrey thought he did. Mr. Flatman leaned back in his office chair, and raising his small white hands, pressed the tips of his taper fingers against each other, as he looked inquiringly but patiently at the gallant officer. Flatman was a decidedly good-looking man—small, dapper, with a pale complexion, well-set features, a shaven chin, coal-black whiskers, short hair of the same colour,

neatly parted in the middle, dark beady eyes, and regular teeth of dazzling whiteness, which he showed very often—perhaps too often. He was elaborately but quietly dressed; his shirt cuffs, which he shot ostentatiously, and his very tall collar, were spotless in their purity; his coat was well cut, and the watch-chain in his waistcoat was substantial without being oppressive by its gorgeousness. A youth, a small tradesman, or a landlady would put down Mr. Flatman as a "perfect gentleman:" an elderly man of the world would suspend his judgment.

Templar replied, after a little hesitation, "Weevil and I have been very unlucky lately. I am afraid we can't do very much; but my friend, Mr. Clare, is ready with a substantial amount."

"Very glad to hear it, Captain Templar; though, between you, you ought really to be able to raise the whole. What proposition, now, am I to make to my clients? Remember that times are bad, and unless you can suggest something really handsome, they will probably decline to listen."

"Nonsense, Flatman," said Templar. "You can talk your people into anything, I know."

"You overrate my powers, sir, and give our young friend here quite a false impression. Yes? What is it?"

This to a clerk who stepped in after knocking discreetly at the door. "Show him into the next room. I will attend to him directly. Important business," continued he, addressing the two friends. "Will you excuse me for a few minutes, and take a glass of sherry meanwhile? Good old East India, I assure you!"

"Well, I don't mind," said Templar.

Geoffrey was nothing loth. He required a little fillip, as his spirits were fast sinking, although Mr. Flatman was polite, and nothing terrible had been said, nor even hinted at. The sherry and glasses were produced, and the lawyer retired.

"It's more awkward than I thought," said Geoffrey.

"Oh!" replied Templar, "we have not told him what you can give him yet. Don't be afraid. I'll pull you through, old

man, if I possibly can. At the worst, you know, he'd only sell me up. He can't well go at you, as you're under age."

"I never would allow him to do anything against you for helping me," exclaimed Geoffrey, hotly. "Why, I have had the money, not you!"

"True, true. But you would repay me some day, old chappie," said Templar; "though I must say it would be a bit rough on me."

"Rough on you!—I should think so. It would be horrible," cried the youth, aghast at the notion of his noble friend suffering for his sake, and quite unaware that most of the cash he had received had found its way back into the pockets of Weevil and Templar.

"Never fear!" continued the latter. "We'll try and work the oracle. Only stick to your guns, and follow my lead. By the bye, how much are you going to offer him?"

"Five hundred, of course," answered Geoffrey. "That's what I got from the old man."

"The whole five hundred! Then what will you do for cash meanwhile?"

"I'm blessed if I know. Of course I cannot get any out of the governor for ever so long."

"Of course not," assented Templar. "Look here! How would it suit to offer him three hundred on account, and keep the balance for expenses for the next few months? You'll want to put a pony on Balloon for the City and Sub, you know; and I can find out a good thing or two at Lincoln for you; so you'll be able to give him another lump when the time runs out."

"It's a good plan," said Geoffrey, "and I thought of it myself; but would he take it?"

"That depends," answered the Captain. "I don't know Flatman any better than you do. But I think we might coax him. At any rate, I run a greater risk than you, don't I?"

"Certainly," replied the lad.

"For if things went wrong, he'd certainly pitch into Weevil and me first."

"I suppose so."

"Well, make your mind easy, anyhow. We won't let the governor hear a word! First-rate sherry, this, isn't it?" said Templar, filling himself another glass. "Have a drop more! But I wish Flatman would come back."

The wish was fulfilled, for at that moment the lawyer entered the room, full of apologies.

"My friend Clare will pay two hundred and fifty on account, Mr. Flatman," said Templar, "if you will renew the bill, for a lesser amount, of course, for another six months."

Then the gallant Captain came to Geoffrey's side, and whispered, "Of course we must try and make the best bargain we can. Never start with the outside you can offer."

Geoffrey admired his friend's cleverness, and thought he could not do better than wait to hear the result.

Mr. Flatman looked surprised. "I am afraid I could hardly go to my clients with such a suggestion," he said. "They quite expected the whole amount to be paid down. In fact, the whole thing was only done to oblige *you*, Captain Templar. You are aware that our young friend here is not in a position to offer exactly what we should term marketable securities."

"I fear not," said Templar, collapsing.

"The total amount," continued the lawyer, consulting a book, "is a thousand and seventy-two pounds."

"As much as that?" asked Geoffrey; "why I don't remember agreeing to more than nine hundred and odd."

"You forget the interest, Mr. Clare," said Mr. Flatman, severely. "It was quite understood that three months' interest should be added to the last bills. I believe there can be no mistake about that, Captain Templar?"

"No, I think not," replied that gentleman, "though it seems a deuce of a lot. Now, Flatman, see and arrange it, old man. Don't be hard on us. We've been awfully down on our luck lately, Weevil and I, and we're just about dry."

"Have another glass of sherry, then," suggested Flatman, facetiously.

"No more till we've settled this," replied the Captain, with all the air of a business man.

"I cannot venture to place your offer before my clients," said the lawyer; "they would not look at it. It would be only wasting my time and yours. Now if you increased it, say to five hundred, something might be done."

Geoffrey winced. He was very anxious to keep a little ready money. Balloon, he thought, was a real good thing for the City and Suburban, and just now he could get twenty to one. Fifty pounds invested in this way would be coining money. Besides, he wanted a number of things.

"We can't do five hundred," said the Captain, stoutly. "Three is the very outside. Settle it at that, Flatman, and a bill of eight-fifty, that will pay you and your friends handsomely."

"My dear sir," said the lawyer, unctuously, "you forget my position. I am acting merely as the solicitor in the matter. I get my professional charges, and that is all. I have no interest whatever in the affair, and all I have to do is to see my clients as safe as I can while obliging you."

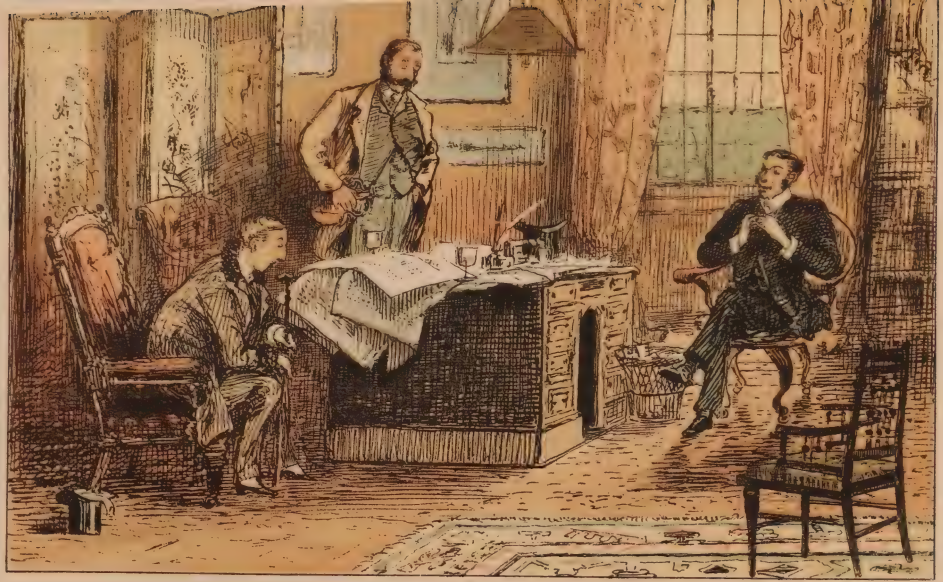
"Oh, I quite understand that, Mr. Flatman," said Geoffrey; "but you can give us a leg up, you know!"

"Well, I will do my best. I cannot give you an answer today, of course, as I must first write to my clients. But you shall know on Monday. You may reckon on my urging them to go as far as they possibly can, Mr. Clare, for the sake of saving you and your friends any unpleasantness. Now that is settled, gentlemen, what are you going to do with yourselves to-morrow? I understand you are living in the country, Mr. Clare."

"Yes," replied the latter. "I came up from Bancaster to get some nags and to settle this matter."

"Precisely. Then, of course, you've nothing to do on Sunday. It's a dull day to spend in an hotel."

"Deuced dull," answered Templar, "and the Club is almost as bad."



"Have another glass of sherry, then."

"It is," assented Flatman. "Now what do you say to having a little quiet dinner with me at my diggings?"

Geoffrey did not at first relish the suggestion. He was too much afraid of Flatman to look forward to a whole evening spent in his company with any pleasure. But the Captain again came over to him and whispered, "Accept by all means! He will be flattered by your dining with him, because you'll be a swell some day, you know, and it will be easier to arrange matters."

On this hint, Geoffrey stammered that he would have much pleasure. Flatman produced his card, and promising to do all he could, bowed them out with much apparent cordiality.

"It's too late to do much about the horses," said Captain Templar, as they walked through the arcade. "Come on to the Club and have a game of billiards."

Geoffrey was nothing loth, and after billiards followed sherry and bitters, and then a dinner at Templar's expense, and an hour at the Gaiety Theatre, and a look in at another place still livelier, and a few more brandies and sodas at the Club when the establishments opened to the general public had closed their doors. Here Geoffrey was introduced to various members of the "Royal Albert," as this half-gambling, half-sporting institution was termed. Though the "Royal Albert" was by no means exclusive, Captain Templar was not considered its most respectable member, and a friend he brought in would probably have been looked upon with some suspicion. But to-night he whispered the words, "Young Mr. Clare of Castle Clare," and folks wondered how he had managed to be on intimate terms with a young man of such a promising future. There were some very jovial fellows in the smoking-room, for though baccarat was the chief attraction, old stagers preferred to recruit their finances in other ways less risky and more profitable to themselves. They knew that the only man likely to win in the long run by baccarat (if fairly played) was the proprietor of the establishment, and though not averse to an occasional gamble, they objected to enriching that gentleman systematically. No one was more strongly of this opinion than Templar. At Monaco there were

ways and means of supplying himself with funds while his youthful friend gambled, but now he was flying for higher game, and had no mind that the profits should go to the Club, and his pigeon depart without a feather to fly with. Therefore, he did not take Geoffrey into the card saloon, but made him comfortable with a big cigar in the pleasantest and liveliest corner of a room where the conversation might sometimes be highly spiced and slangy, but was seldom actually dull.

"What are they doing about Lincoln to-night?" asked one of the party, casually.

"Nothing particular," replied a gentleman who answered to the name of Bluff. "Finesse is at tens; Garland, shaky."

"Sharp chap though, that fellow Horgan. Shouldn't wonder if Garland came with a rush by-and-by," observed a man who had been introduced to Geoffrey as Mr. Joyce.

"I'll take the odds against him," remarked another.

"Twenties?" asked Bluff.

"Not good enough," replied the first speaker. "I believe Horgan is trying to have us all on toast."

"You have just come up from the country?" asked Joyce of Geoffrey, to bring the young fellow into the conversation, Templar having left the room.

"Yes," answered Geoffrey, "from Bankshire."

"Ah! a fine country, Bankshire!" remarked Mr. Bluff.

"What a good thing that was we pulled off over Bagman at the Chalford meeting!"

There was a chorus of "Aye, indeed!"

"Fond of horses?" asked Mr. Joyce of Geoffrey.

"Very," replied he. "I have come up to town to buy a couple."

"Have you?" asked Joyce, quickly, while the others looked interested. "What do you want—yearlings?"

"Oh no," said Geoffrey, "I am looking for a couple of hunters."

"*Bonâ fide* hunters, eh? Something that will go over the sticks! A fast beggar that will just qualify? That is about the ticket."

Geoffrey did not quite follow this: "I beg your pardon?" said he.

"Well, I suppose you are going in for some of the cross-country meetings. Going to train 'em yourself? I know the very nags for you."

"Oh no," answered Geoffrey, "I want a couple of horses to ride."

"That's it, is it?" said Joyce, "a hunting man! Lucky chap! I wish I could afford it. But I've got one or two good ones in my place, if you care to look at them: gallop with a fellow all day and never make a mistake. There are no finer fencers in England."

"I thought you went in for dogs, Joyce," remarked another man.

"Dogs, cats, anything you like. All animals come handy to me, as long as they are good of their sort," replied Joyce. "Ever seen my black curly retriever?"

"No."

"That's the dog that calls a cab, isn't it?" asked Bluff.

"How does he manage that?" inquired Geoffrey.

"Easily enough. When I say,—'Bob, call a hansom!' he cuts off like a bird to the nearest stand. Then he jumps up on the board of the first hansom he sees, and barks; then he jumps down again, and runs a little way towards my house. By-and-by the cabby begins to wonder what the dog is up to. Bob keeps jumping up and barking at the fellow, and running a little way, and coming back, till the cabman thinks he's wanted somewhere, and makes a start. Then Bob brings him to the house, and he won't let him go further than my door, for he kicks up such an infernal row at the horse's head when he gets to Number 98, that cabby pulls up."

"Clever dog!" exclaimed Geoffrey.

"Oh! that's nothing to my setter," remarked a gentleman they called Fred. "He fetches the paper for me every morning. I give him a penny, and he runs round to the news-shop for it."

"Lots of dogs do that!" said Bluff.

"That isn't all. The other day I had no coppers——"

"No coppers?" interrupted some one else. "You mean, only hot ones."

"Hold your row, and let me finish my story," said Fred. "I gave the dog sixpence. He had to be careful for fear he should swallow it, as it was so small. He was out a d—l of a time, and I began to be anxious. At last back he comes with the paper—and just inside it—what do you think?—was five-pennyworth of coppers."

"Of course the newsagent had put them there."

"So he had; but it appears that he began by giving the dog a paper as usual—just to see, you know. But Rag would not go away. Then he gave him a penny, but the dog whined, and put his paws on the counter. He kept on howling and crying till he got the five pence, and then at last he cut away home. That's the reason he was so long."

"That's not a bad tale," said Bluff, reflectively, "but I had a dog once who knew a lot more than that."

"Nonsense," said Joyce. "Fred takes the cake."

"Not a bit of it. Just listen. It was last summer, when I was staying down at my people's place in Suffolk."

"There's a whopper coming now," whispered Joyce to Geoffrey. "He's got no people, and they've not got any place at all, and there isn't such a county as Suffolk, I believe."

"Well?" asked Fred.

"Well, you know, being with the old folks, I had to go to church every Sunday——"

"Fancy you in church!" exclaimed a scoffer.

"Will you be quiet? I can't get on with my story if you don't hold your row!"

"Drive on, old man—we'll be as quiet as mice."

"I say that I went to church every Sunday, quite proper. Of course Spry had to stay at home."

"Who was Spry?" asked some one.

"The dog, of course. Well, you all know how hot it was last summer. One Sunday it was hotter than ever, and the

church was stifling. So they set the door open, as it was a quiet country place. I got a little sleepy, and, just as I was nodding a bit, I was startled by a low whine. There was Spry scratching at the door of the pew. It was awkward, wasn't it? I did not want to lose my character in the parish, and I thought if I tried to turn the dog out there'd be a d—l of a row in the church. So when he would not go away, I just opened the door of the pew and let him in. He laid down quite quietly, and never stirred till the devil-dodger began to spout."

"What?" asked Geoffrey.

"Till the parson began preaching, you know. It was a new chap, who put his back into it well, and threw his arms about, and yelled all over the place. Spry sat up and watched him. I thought he'd howl, but he didn't. He only kept staring at the pulpit. It all went off beautifully, and the dog walked after me out of church as solemn as a saint."

"Well," remarked Fred, "I don't see anything wonderful in that."

"Wait a bit," said Bluff. "You'll hear the end directly. The old folks dined early on Sunday, and, after a good stodge, I went to smoke under a tree in the garden, and of course dropped off to sleep. I was woke by a tremendous row—howls and yells enough to rouse the whole village. The noise came from the yard, so I shook myself and went off to find out what was up. When I got there, what do you think I saw?"

"Spit it out, old man," said Joyce.

"You'll hardly believe me, but there was Spry, sitting on the top of his kennel, howling and yelping like fury, and every now and then throwing his paws about. All round him in the yard were the village dogs—terriers, and pointers, and pugs, and I don't know what more—staring at him and listening. Old Spry had watched the parson, and thought he'd try a sermon."

"Oh! I say!" said Fred, "that's a little too strong."

"True, I assure you," asseverated Bluff.

"It's a good one, anyhow," said another.

"The kettle's yours!" cried a third.

"Not so fast, please!" exclaimed Joyce. "Will you back your dog for a tenner to do that again?"

"I'm sorry to say I can't," replied Bluff. "Poor Spry is dead."

"I should think he were," said Joyce, quietly. "Now, Mr. Clare, you've heard that story?"

"Yes," said Geoffrey, "and it's very wonderful."

"But I'll tell you something more wonderful still; and, what's more, it's true."

"So is mine!" cried Bluff.

"Perhaps it is; but, anyhow, you can't prove it. But listen to mine. Do you think a cat will eat mustard?"

"Of course not!" was the unanimous answer.

"Well, I've got a cat that will," said Joyce, "eat quite a spoonful of mustard—as if she liked it, too."

"Absurd!" said Fred.

"Ridiculous!" cried Geoffrey.

"It's true, though, and I'll back my cat to eat mustard for a pony! Who's game?"

"Oh, there's some sell!" exclaimed Geoffrey, wanting to be sharp. "Stuff that looks like mustard, but it isn't."

"Not a bit of it. You shall mix the mustard yourself, and taste it first. Now that's fair! Anybody want to bet?"

There was silence for a minute. Then Geoffrey spoke:

"I don't mind betting a trifle that your cat won't eat the mustard if I mix it."

"I'll bet you a pony she does. Is it a bet?"

"Not a pony," said Geoffrey. "A fiver."

"I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll lay you twenty pounds to ten, and Bluff shall be umpire."

"All right!" said Geoffrey. "You're on!"

"Then come down to my place to-morrow afternoon," said Joyce. "It's near the Finchley Road Station; and bring a tenner with you. You will see a couple of horses, too, if you like."

"A real cat, of course?" asked Geoffrey, with a glimmer of suspicion.

"Real cat, of course; no kid. She'll eat the mustard you mix."

"All right!" said the young man, and the bet was duly noted.

"What an ass that fellow Joyce must be!" said he to Templar, on their way home, after many brandies and sodas.

"I'm not quite sure," said Templar, when he had heard the story. "But we will go up and see his nags. Anyhow, I think one of them might suit you."

And so, in the small hours, Geoffrey turned into bed.

CHAPTER IX.

A MUSTARD CAT.

Mr. Joyce did a little business in horses, but was not a regular dealer. He sometimes bought a cheap yearling; more often some two or three year olds whose early performances had disgusted their owner. With another gentleman, he kept a small private training stable, which was occasionally quite empty, and never boasted more than half-a-dozen nags. The horses prepared for their work by the partnership seldom won a race at all, and never an important one; yet Mr. Joyce & Co. did not seem to lose money, and the neat detached house on the north side of London was in the course of time enlarged by the addition of a wing. Here Captain Templar and Geoffrey Clare arrived towards three o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. The latter youth had not quite got over the numerous "splits" in which he had indulged the night before.

"Feel better, old chappie?" asked Templar, as the cab drove up.

"A beastly head on me still," answered our hero. "It was that last big cigar at the Club that did me up."

"A walk round here will do you good. It's a nice breezy place. We'll keep the cab—we shall want it to go on to Goodman's, in case Joyce has nothing to suit us."

The little garden was neat and trim; a few snowdrops timidly reared their heads, and from a small conservatory on the left of the house came a blaze of colour and a scent of hyacinths. Respectability, and even a little more, were characteristics of Mr. Joyce's villa. The brass door-handle and bell-pull were bright as mirrors; the parlour-maid who opened the door was clean and imposing; the tiny hall was floored with tiles, and had substantial oak fittings; the drawing-room, into which they were shown, was supplied with "a complete suite

in rosewood and red damask, consisting of, &c., &c." Mr. Joyce did not keep them long waiting. He appeared with outstretched hands, and a beaming countenance.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Clare! Just finished my Sunday dinner! Will you have some brought back for you? It's not all eaten, I should think. No? Then at least a glass of sherry and a biscuit—do, now, after your long drive!"

Sherry and a biscuit! Geoffrey shuddered at the suggestion. No, thank you. He might be able to manage a soda with a tiny dash—the tiniest dash—of brandy in it. That was all. Meanwhile, Mr. Bluff came in, and was duly introduced, reminding both cordially that he had met them the night before.

"We have not much time, Joyce," said Templar, looking at his watch; "so if you've got a nag that would suit my friend here, you'd better trot him out at once."

"All right; we'll go down to the stables at once," answered Joyce.

"We've got a bet to settle first!" exclaimed Geoffrey, eager to claim his tenner, and fearing that Mr. Joyce would try to get out of a wager he had made at an advanced hour of the evening.

"We can do that when we've seen the horses," said Templar, rather impatiently.

"Where's the wonderful cat?" asked Geoffrey.

"Oh, she's about the house somewhere," said Joyce, carelessly. "We shall get hold of her when we want her. Come on to the stables, then."

Mr. Joyce led the way, and Captain Templar walked down the garden by his side. Mr. Bluff followed with Geoffrey.

"Joyce is a wonderful fellow about horses," said Bluff.

"Is he?"

"Yes; understands them thoroughly—no better man in England. Awfully straight, too: would not do his worst enemy."

"That's a good thing!" answered Geoffrey. "But I'm not afraid of being done. Believe me, Templar and I know a good horse when we see one, and the copers are not likely to get to windward of us."

"Ah! yes!" said Bluff. "I dare say Captain Templar is a good judge. But I'll just tell you one thing. Look out for Joyce's horse in the City and Sub."

"What's the horse's name?"

"That I must not tell. Honour, you know, honour!" said Mr. Bluff. "But you follow my advice, and look out!"

How he was to "look out" for a horse whose name he did not know, puzzled Geoffrey; but he supposed that he was credited with secret sources of information, and nodded oracularly. Meanwhile, Captain Templar said to Mr. Joyce:

"What's this you're going to show us? Don't waste time over real bad ones, Joyce; that's not my game."

"No, I won't. It would not be much use my trying it on with you, if I wanted to. Are you running straight?"

"Straight as a die," replied Templar. "I'm looking after this youth."

"Put in as guardian by the Lord Chancellor, eh?" asked Joyce, with a sardonic smile. "He has chosen a real good man for the job."

"Anyhow, I've got to take care of him, and I will," answered Templar, almost angrily. "I don't mind a good price, but it must be for value. No broken-down screws for us."

"Keep your hair on, old man," said Joyce. "Who wants to stick you with screws? But if you mean paying, I can show you a real out-and-outer—fit to go across country in any company."

"All right; let's see him."

"What's the com.?" asked Joyce.

"Thirty per cent."

"Rough, that."

"Well, take it or leave it," answered Templar.

"All right, then," replied his friend. "But you must not screw me down too much."

"Oh! you'll open your mouth wide enough, I know," answered Templar, and as they had now arrived at the stable-yard the conversation became general.

Mr. Joyce kept his "race horses in training" elsewhere. The stabling at the villa was on a comparatively small scale,

but just as trim as the rest of the establishment. There were three loose boxes, and twice as many stalls, occupied by horses neatly clothed in kersey rugs, with numerous jays embroidered on them in lieu of a monogram. Most people would at once exclaim, "Quite a gentleman's stable!" for not only were the horses well clothed, but there was a new plait of straw all along the stalls; the rings were of polished brass, the wooden partitions brightly varnished, and the whole as clean as elbow-grease could make it.

"The nags in this stable," said Joyce, "are mostly for carriage work. Now, if you were thinking of a phaeton, Mr. Clare, these two bays would be the very thing. They're Mrs. Joyce's, and she would not part with them to any one but a friend. Look at those quarters!" he added, sweeping the rug off one of them. "Did you ever see a prettier little horse? And the other is quite as good. Take the bays out, Jim, and show them to Mr. Clare."

"But we don't want phaeton horses," exclaimed Templar.

"There's no harm in showing them, surely!" answered Joyce. "I always like to look at a handsome horse, even if I don't want him. It's a pleasure to me, and so it is to you, Mr. Clare, is it not?"

"It is, indeed," replied Geoffrey, who had visions of driving in the Park behind a pair of smart bays, such as Mr. Joyce and his Jim were now showing. "And very likely I may buy a pair next season. But I'm in the country now, you know."

"These would be just as good for the country, Mr. Clare," said Joyce, pointing out their action, admiringly; "you can't put them wrong."

"Mr. Clare is well provided with harness-horses already," said Templar.

Geoffrey felt a little ruffled. Why should Templar always interfere, even when he was doing something so entirely without danger as examining a pair of bays? They were certainly very handsome, compact, round-barrelled horses, with small heads but powerful necks, big loins and quarters, and high action, as sleek and fat as sugar and very light work could make them.

"What are you asking for them?" said Geoffrey.

"Well, I can't really sell them myself, as they belong to the Missis," replied Mr. Joyce. "I do not think she would take less than three hundred for them."

"Ah!" said Geoffrey, much impressed; "that's quite out of the question. In fact, I don't want them at all, and only asked out of curiosity. They are very good looking."

"No handsomer pair in London. Take them in, Jim. I knew you'd like them. I never keep a bad horse; that is my motto."

"Now for the hunters, Joyce," said Captain Templar.

"Here you are," answered that gentleman, opening a loose box. "This one is thorough-bred, jumps like a bird, but——" and he lowers his voice, "the fact is, Mr. Clare, he wants a man on his back."

"Well, I'm not buying a horse for a lady," answered Geoffrey.

"I mean, he wants a fellow who can ride. He is a little free, you know. It's not everyone who could be trusted with him." Mr. Joyce might well make this observation, for the lean blood-like brown whom Jim now led out was a notorious runaway, and his owner was perfectly aware of it.

"He can gallop all day, and all night too," said Mr. Joyce, confidently.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Templar, sotto voce, after he had looked at the horse's legs and watched him walking up and down without being able to find any special fault with him. "On the square, mind, or we're off."

"Well, he's a little hard to hold," said Mr. Joyce.

"Geoff!" exclaimed Templar, "this beggar won't suit you. He'd be worse than that mare of your governor's you told me about. I thought I knew the horse, and Mr. Joyce tells me it's the same."

Geoffrey repented his momentary irritation towards his best friend. He had no wish to repeat the Amberwitch performance, nor, in fact, did he particularly like the appearance of the horse. So they went on to the next box. This was occupied by another brown, a substantial animal of less breeding than the last, but handsome, powerful, and not without substance. He pleased both the Captain and Geoffrey.

"The brown galloped well."

"Is this the out-and-outer?" asked the former.

"He *is* one," said Mr. Bluff.

"Yes," replied Mr. Joyce, with a little hesitation. "Just throw your leg over him and ride him round the paddock, Captain."

The brown galloped well and strongly, and jumped a hurdle to perfection. But Templar was not satisfied. Instead of bringing the horse back to the stable, he lifted the latch of a gate, turned into a lane, and soon disappeared.

Mr. Joyce looked annoyed, but did not dare to say much. But a sudden thought struck him.

"As Captain Templar seems to be taking a ride on the brown, what do you say to deciding our bet, Mr. Clare?"

"By all means," answered Geoffrey, very sure of his case. "Give me some mustard and produce your cat. Remember, I am to mix the mustard myself."

"All right!" said Joyce, while Bluff cried—

"I'll back the cat for a fiver!"

"Done with you," answered Geoffrey, "that she won't eat the mustard."

"I bet she will," said Bluff. "It's a bet."

"Jim," said Mr. Joyce, "run up to the house and ask for a tin of mustard, a cup, and a spoon. Bob," he added, turning to a helper, "is the stable-cat about?"

"Yes, sir, she's in the Banker's box."

"Oh! it's the stable-cat that does this wonder?" asked Geoffrey, incredulously.

"Precisely," said Mr. Joyce.

"You'll lose," Geoffrey went on.

"We'll see. Here is the mustard. Now come into the saddle-room and mix it yourself."

Geoffrey took the tin, which was marked "Colman's Mustard," but cautiously tasted it before proceeding to the operation of mixing.

"Is it all right?" asked Joyce.

"All right!" exclaimed Geoffrey, who had taken a little too much. "I should like to see the cat that will eat the beastly stuff!"

"So you shall; she will lick it all up."

"Bring her along, then," said he, "the mixture's ready."

Bob appeared with a very ordinary specimen of the domestic cat, which looked rather scared, and attempted to escape from his arms. Geoffrey held out the cup containing the mustard, and of course as soon as the cat smelt it she showed evident symptoms of dislike, and struggled to get away.

"There!" cried he, triumphantly, "she won't eat it. Pay up!"

"Not so fast, please!" said Mr. Joyce. "It's my turn, now. I'll make her eat it. Give me the cat."

Bluff and the stablemen formed a wondering circle round Mr. Joyce, who held the cat securely round the neck with his left hand, and with his right proceeded to spread the mustard over her chest and stomach, disregarding her struggles and cleverly dodging her claws. When a fair quantity had thus been applied in the shape of a plaster, he let the cat go. She at once began licking herself vigorously, fuming and spitting the while.

"Oh! that's not fair!" exclaimed Geoffrey, "I never thought of that!"

"Your fault, Mr. Clare. I did not say *how* the cat would eat the mustard. I only bet that she would. And she's eating it fast enough, anyway!"

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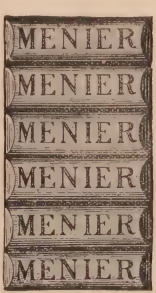

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CHAPTER X.

A DEAL.

By the time Captain Templar rode into the yard, poor puss had licked off the whole of the offensive mustard, and Geoffrey, much chagrined, had to admit that he had lost his money, which he proceeded to pay on the spot, swearing to have his revenge some day. Templar looked on, disgusted, for the notes which his ward was handing over might just as well, thought he, have found their way into his own pocket.

"The brown horse won't suit you," he whispered to Geoffrey; "he stumbles on the road, and isn't safe. I'll tell you all about him by-and-by. Mr. Joyce," added he, aloud, "we will go on, unless you have something better for us. This is not the class of horse Mr. Clare wants."

"'Kildare' will suit you to a T," said Mr. Joyce, now in high good humour. "Jim, bring out the black."

The black was a big bony beast, sixteen hands high, with a lean neck, a goose rump, and a Roman nose—about as ugly a brute as was ever seen. But he had fine sloping shoulders, broad quarters, and plenty of quality about him. The moment he came out, Templar saw that this was an old stager, who would probably be the very animal for Geoffrey. For he had not unlimited confidence in the young man's horsemanship, and thought he would do better with a clever old screw than with a keen, sound, young horse.

"Very gummy legs," remarked the Captain, when he had examined "Kildare;" "just put a saddle on him."

The old horse was as quiet as a lamb; walked and trotted round the paddock to perfection, and when sent at the hurdle, cantered up smoothly and jumped it without hesitation.

"You don't surely want me to buy that ugly beast!" exclaimed Geoffrey, when Templar brought him back.

"Just try him. Get on him yourself," was the only answer.

Geoffrey obeyed, though unwillingly. Before he had gone round the field twice, he began to think that "Kildare" was a comfortable hack; when he trotted him he soon appreciated the smooth, easy way in which the horse threw out his forelegs, and the pleasure of riding an animal which did not tear at his arms, though willing enough to go.

"Put him at the hurdle, Mr. Clare!" exclaimed Mr. Joyce.

"Go on!" said Bluff. "Show him off a bit!"

Geoffrey did not half like it, but was more afraid to look afraid than to face the jump. He need not, however, have been in the least alarmed. "Kildare" took the hurdle quite calmly, and though his rider was jerked forward, that was not the horse's fault. He sent him at it again, and this time remembering to sit well back, did not move in the saddle.

"Well done!" cried the three spectators, unanimously.

"He is awfully ugly," said Geoffrey, dismounting.

"Look here, Geoff, old man," said Templar, taking him aside. "Don't be vexed with me if I tell you the truth."

"Drive on! What is it? Of course I shan't."

"You know I mean well. Now between you and me and the post, you have not had much practice across country, have you?"

"No, I have not," admitted the youth.

"Well, you don't want to make a fool of yourself down in Bankshire, do you, old chappie?"

"Not if I can help it. Trust me for that!"

"But if you have not got a good clever horse, a young fellow is sure to make an ass of himself somehow, even if he's a first-rate rider. The governor would not like it, so my advice is, buy this old screw, and sell him when you've had a bit of practice. He won't let you go wrong; he knows his business, I can tell you."

"But they'll all laugh at the brute!"

"Not a bit of it. When they see him steal away they will laugh on the wrong side of their mouths, depend upon it."

"But you say he is a screw?" observed Geoffrey.

"Of course he is, and we'll buy him at the price of a screw."

"Very well, all right," said the young man, only half convinced, "as long as the governor does not mind."

"The old gentleman will be delighted. He'll put you down as a first-rate judge, and you will be one, too, very soon, if you stick to it. Mr. Joyce," he asked, approaching that gentleman, "what do you want for the black?"

"Fifty guineas," replied Joyce, calmly.

"Fifty fiddlesticks!" answered Templar. "You shall have five-and-twenty pounds."

"Five-and-twenty pounds for the cleverest horse in the three Kingdoms! Captain Templar, you're laughing at me. Take 'Kildare' in, Jim."

"You know he is not worth that," said Templar.

"Come, Captain Templar, as I've won a little bet from Mr. Clare, and he is a friend of yours, I'll say forty-five, but not a penny less. That horse would be worth two hundred if he were a couple of years younger. He's a gift at the price I put upon him."

"Quite out of the question, Mr. Joyce; five-and-twenty. Mr. Clare will make it guineas, and that's the outside."

"Can't be done. The horse cost me nearly twice as much, and I'd sooner hunt him myself, though I'm a poor man and can't afford it."

"Very well, then. Geoff, it's no use stopping here, let us go on to Goodman's."

"You might give him forty," whispered Geoffrey, "if you think he's such a good horse."

"Hush!" exclaimed Templar, "you will get him for less than that. Good bye, Mr. Joyce."

To the unsophisticated, it might appear illogical that Captain Templar should wish to drive a hard bargain for the sake of his *protégé*, considering that he was to get nearly a third of the pur-

chase money. But the gallant officer was an old hand, and would not kill the goose that laid the golden eggs. He expected that Colonel Neville knew something about horses, and wished Geoffrey to return to Bankshire with a couple of nags worth a sum approaching to what he had paid for them. It was his intention to secure his hold on the young man by every means in his power.

"Have a glass of sherry before you go, at any rate," said Joyce.

"I don't mind that," answered the Captain, as the pair walked towards the house.

"You should buy that horse," Mr. Bluff said to Geoffrey as they entered. "He's a wonderful performer."

"He's not worth the money," answered the youth, as if he had gauged the horse's value to a sovereign.

Over the sherry "Kildare's" merits were again discussed, and Mr. Joyce knew of some wonderful fences the horse had already cleared without a mistake in the Pytchley and Quorn countries. Captain Templar at last sprung to twenty-eight pounds, and Mr. Joyce came down to forty guineas. After the buyers had more than once taken their hats to bid good-bye, Joyce exclaimed, holding out his hand:—

"Well, I don't like to let a young gentleman like Mr. Clare miss such a horse as that, particularly as he is a friend of yours. Take him for thirty-five."

"It's too much," replied Templar; "we really must be off now. You're not going to sell, I can see, and we're certainly not going to buy at your figure."

Now Mr. Bluff came in useful.

"Look here, gentlemen," he exclaimed. "There is not much between you, and we've both been well treated by Mr. Clare, who paid up over the cat like a man as he is. Let me settle it."

"I'll leave it to you, Mr. Bluff," said Joyce, with apparent reluctance.

"I won't bind Mr. Clare," said Templar; "but say on, Bluff."

"I say, give him thirty-three pounds, and take him," said Bluff, holding out both hands. "No better animal ever looked through a bridle, as *I* know. You've got a good bargain for the money, and Mr. Joyce has more nags than he can do with just now."

"Thirty-three be it," said Mr. Joyce, "as the season is getting on."

"All right!" said Geoffrey; "thirty-three."

And so it was settled. But Captain Templar scolded Geoffrey for giving in so quickly. "We could have got him for thirty," he said, and no doubt they could, for the horse was aged, and would not have fetched more than fifteen at Tattersall's. Everyone, however, was satisfied. Geoffrey because he had got a clever horse at a low figure, thanks to his invaluable friend Templar; Joyce, because he had sold the horse at good profit; Bluff, because he was to get a sovereign out of the transaction, and the captain because he netted ten pounds (which he secured in notes before they left the house), and because he had made himself indispensable to Geoffrey.

From Goodman, an unfashionable, rough, but honest dealer, they secured a smart bay mare, about fifteen hands and a half, clever and sound, but not up to much more weight than Geoffrey's, for seventy pounds. Here the Captain had to be satisfied with another moderate tenner, but, on the whole, it was not a bad day's work for a Sunday, and they returned to town well pleased to dress for Mr. Flatman's dinner.

CHAPTER XI.

A PLEASANT SURPRISE.

was not generally quite comfortable in the society of ladies. They made him self-conscious, and hampered his freedom of speech and action, and when he was introduced to Mrs. Flatman, he was at first unpleasantly surprised, for he had hoped that the dinner would, at any rate be confined to his own sex. But the momentary annoyance soon wore off. For Mrs. Flatman was a lady of prepossessing appearance and charming manners. She put the young man at his ease far more quickly than he would have supposed possible. She talked to him as if he were an authority on racing matters—which, indeed, he thought he was—and conversed of the Lincolnshire and the City and Suburban just as easily as any man might have done. She flattered him by a few gentle and delicate allusions to his splendid prospects, and to the position a young man of his appearance and talents might hope to occupy. She expressed great and apparently sincere pleasure at receiving so distinguished a member of the landed gentry in her humble dwelling. And she looked after

his comforts at dinner as if he had been the prodigal son. Before the dessert was on the table, Geoffrey felt on excellent terms with himself. He had never been so brilliant and amusing,—at any rate, he had never before felt so entirely at his ease in the company of a *real* lady. His former favourites among the fair sex would, as he admitted himself, scarcely deserve that adjective.

Geoffrey was not an epicure, and thought Mr. Tom Kirk an idiot to talk as he did about the scientific way of cooking mushrooms, or the exact mixture required for a salad. But still, he enjoyed what he called a good dinner, plenty to eat, lots of wine, and no flummery. He found this, and charms hitherto unsuspected, at Mr. Flatman's in perfection, and was happy in proportion. Flatman and Captain Templar talked together, and gave him every opportunity of listening to Mrs. Flatman's soft voice, and of admiring the smile that wreathed her *piquante* face. The surroundings were worthy of the pretty hostess. The room was small, but furnished in good taste. There were comfortable easy chairs everywhere, soft and harmonious draperies, rich dark carpets, and good pictures on the walls. The table was lighted by wax candles under pink shades, and decorated with a few hot-house flowers.

When the maidservant finally left the room, and Geoffrey thought that Mrs. Flatman would soon follow, cigars were produced, and the lady of the house said, with a bewitching smile, that if Mr. Clare had no objection, she would as usual light a cigarette instead of retiring to the drawing-room. Geoffrey was, of course, delighted, and found to his surprise that his sallies and tales of the turf were keenly appreciated by a willing listener. When he had dined with one or other of his school friends at their homes, he had found that turf talk was not understood and his stories not applauded. He had taken refuge in silence, alternating with brief and guarded speech. Here, on the contrary, he was encouraged to talk much, and to talk freely, and once or twice when he himself feared he had gone too far, a peal of silvery laughter had proved that he was amusing and not

offending his hostess. Altogether, it was quite the jolliest evening he had spent for many months, and when, on leaving, Mrs. Flatman squeezed his hand with a gentle but decided pressure, and suggested that he should join their party at the theatre on the next evening, he at once made up his mind to put the governor off, and stop in town a day longer.

"What theatre are you going to?" asked Geoffrey, who had a wholesome terror of Irving, and hated Shakespeare beyond words.

"Oh, something lively," said Mrs. Flatman, consulting the morning paper. "Let us go to Toole's; or stay, what do you say to the Gaiety?"

"Exactly my form," said Geoffrey; "the very ticket."

His approval being expressed in so unmistakable a manner, Mrs. Flatman added that her husband would take care to get a box or stalls, and dismissed the fascinated youth with another tender squeeze of the hand.

"That's an out-and-outer," said he to Captain Templar, as they walked down the street in search of a hansom. "A real nailer, and no mistake."

"She's a very jolly woman," said the Captain.

"Rather. No deuced nonsense about her: no flummery, and æsthetics, and sage greens, and that sort of thing. She's in the know, too, I should think."

"I fancy she could give you a straight tip, occasionally," said Templar, with a wink.

"I believe you, my boy. I shall drop in when I want to back one some day. And do you know," continued the youth, confidentially, "I think she's rather taken by yours truly. She asked me to come in any afternoon I was in town, just for tea, you know; not that I care about five o'clock slops. But I expect that form would give a fellow a B. and S., if he wanted one."

"No doubt: anything you liked. But look out for squalls; I don't think Flatman would stand any nonsense."

"Oh, I say!" replied Geoffrey, highly pleased at the sug-

gestion; "you're going too fast, old man. *Honi soit*, you know —no larks. She's a real lady, and no mistake."

How long Geoffrey, who had drank as much wine as was good for him, would have expatiated in his own special style on Mrs. Flatman's perfections it is impossible to say, but fortunately for Captain Templar a hansom cab approached, and the two friends drove off to the club to finish the evening.

Not a word had been said about renewing a portion of the loan. It was not surprising that Geoffrey should have forgotten all about it, for he was enjoying a new and altogether absorbing pleasure—that of being gently flattered and stroked the right way by a clever and attractive woman. It was the first time he had had such luck. His school friends and female relations had not struck the right chord, and he only knew the cheap and vulgar talk of women who are not very particular about introductions. To be put at his ease, and spoken to so kindly by what he termed a real lady, was as delightful as it was surprising, and it is no wonder that by the end of the evening he entertained quite a high opinion of himself as an attractive man of the world. Not until he reached the door of his hotel did he think of the bills due, and exclaimed, suddenly, "Oh, by Jove! I forgot all about the money. Have you settled it with Flatman?"

"No," replied Templar. "He told me that he had not heard from his principals yet, but would give us an answer to-morrow at twelve o'clock. I'll call for you. Mind you are ready."

"All right," said Geoffrey, stumbling into the dark passage "Good-night, old f'lla."

His courage and his self-confidence had evaporated long before the solicitor received the two friends next day. It is not necessary to describe the interview at length. Suffice it to say that, after dwelling on his anxiety to oblige Mr. Clare and Captain Templar, Mr. Flatman stated that the times were too bad for his principals to accept the terms offered, and that all they could do was to give another six months time if three hundred

pounds were paid down. Geoffrey was sleepy and cross, and so anxious to postpone the evil day that he would have jumped at the offer, and at once agreed to pay what amounted to sixty per cent. if he had not been protected by the ever-watchful Templar. That gentleman characterised the suggestion as preposterous, and pretended to be very angry; indeed, he wished to break off negotiations at once, and took up his hat, with the words, "All right, if you can't be more reasonable, sell me up, and Weevil too. Much good may it do you. My sticks are at your service."

Now it was Geoffrey's turn to intervene, and he succeeded in calming his enthusiastic friend down. The latter took him aside, and said:

"You're an ass, Geoffrey. Let them sell me up. It won't matter. You'll make it all right when you come into your money."

But of course such a generous idea could not for a moment be entertained, and after much negotiation it was finally settled that Geoffrey was to pay two hundred and fifty, and sign fresh bills to the amount of nine hundred pounds. Intensely relieved, and no less grateful to his friend, Geoffrey walked through the Burlington with a very handsome balance in his pocket, and first indulged himself in a couple of very bright-coloured scarves, which, he thought, would look well in the hunting-field. Under Templar's guidance he then proceeded to a fashionable tailor's, where he ordered a pink coat and an assortment of waistcoats of various colours, and after completing his outfit by visits to the breeches and bootmakers, turned into the hotel for a sherry-and-bitters. Here a perfumed little note was handed to him. Its contents were as follows:—

"Dear Mr. Clare,—I have Box No. 7 at the Gaiety. If you will come about nine, I shall be very glad.

"Yours ever,

Emmeline Flatman."

Under the combined influence of this note, of the successful negotiation, and of heartfelt gratitude to Templar, it is not to be wondered at that he offered that gentleman twenty-five pounds (which he termed a pony), and that this sum was accepted, purely as a loan, of course. Nor need our readers be surprised that he next rushed off to one of those attractive flower-shops on the west side of Regent Street, and invested a guinea in a bouquet for Mrs. Flatman, which was at once despatched by a messenger to Regent's Park. Geoffrey did not forget a button-hole for his own coat, and appeared at the Gaiety, after a choice little dinner at Romano's, in full dress, and with a collar amazing to the lookers-on, and surely painful in the extreme to himself. The French say that one must suffer to be beautiful, and certainly Geoffrey verified the proverb so far as the suffering was concerned. He was, possibly, not beautiful after all. He would have looked far better in the most ordinary turn-down than in the gigantic white board which surrounded his throat. But Mrs. Flatman, who to his surprise was the only occupant of the box, evidently thought his "get-up" a success, as she received him with a dazzling smile. Captain Templar sat down behind them, and after a few minutes discreetly retired to look for a friend whom he had perceived in the stalls.

What nonsense Geoffrey talked, and what Mrs. Flatman replied, it boots not to tell. It was late before the solicitor himself appeared, so late, that Geoffrey had already suggested to the fair enchantress the propriety of seeing her home. He was saved this trouble by Mr. Flatman and Captain Templar's arrival at the same time, beyond the eleventh hour. The leave-taking at the door was short, and though Geoffrey was sorely tempted to prolong his stay in town yet another day to have an opportunity of taking afternoon tea with Mrs. Flatman, he felt that any further delay would be dangerous. The horses had already gone down to Bancaster, and he had promised to follow them in the first morning train. He did not dare to risk his guardian's anger. Hitherto everything had gone smoothly; it

would be a pity to spoil matters by an imprudent step. These were, of course, not Geoffrey's own thoughts. They were suggested by his invaluable adviser and honest friend, Templar, and acted on, though unwillingly. Only when he was safely locked into a smoking-carriage, and the train steamed out of the terminus, did the gallant Captain lose sight of his *protégé*, whom, by-the-by, he had been obliged to haul out of bed on that morning almost by main force.

CHAPTER XII.

"HE GIVES IT WILLING."

the Hall, Colonel Neville received Geoffrey with as much joy as if the lad had been absent for a year. There was to be a dinner-party at Mr. Germaine's, entirely in the young man's honour, on the next evening, and the Colonel was almost nervously anxious lest the impression produced by him should not be a favourable one. Of course he had noticed Geoffrey's coats and ties, though in his *naïf* freshness he had supposed them to be the correct thing for a young man to wear. He had been surprised that such was the fashion, but presumed that fashions had much altered during recent years, and that young men now, perhaps, assumed garments which, formerly, no gentleman would have worn. Tom Kirk felt quite sorry for his friend's implicit faith, and good-naturedly strove to control Geoffrey's exuberant taste for slang, for strange expressions, and for wonderful colours. The first step he took in this direction was to procure a servant for the youth, and when the latter, returning from town, walked into his room at the Hall, he found a neat-handed individual carefully folding away his clothes.

"This is Pewter," said the Colonel, "your servant."

Pewter touched his forelock, and continued his work. His view of the situation was a decided one, as soon as he had examined his new master's wardrobe. "The young gent don't know how to dress," was his conclusion, and the obvious duty of a good servant was to teach him how to dress. But Pewter had been in "good houses," and was not so foolish as to inflict his ideas too abruptly on Mr. Geoffrey Clare. Not till the next morning did he open the war which, with Mr. Tom Kirk's secret assistance, he was waging against his master's style.

"What suit will you please to wear this morning, sir?" he asked, when Geoffrey was thoroughly awake.

"Oh! any of the check suits," replied Geoffrey. "The red one will do."

"Begging your parden, sir," said Pewter, "what's the programme for to-day, sir?"

"The programme?" asked Geoffrey, surprised. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what's hup, sir? Is it to be shooting, or hunting, or only walking about; or is it to be stopping at home reading the paper?"

"I believe the Colonel is going to take me over the farm," said Geoffrey, yawning.

"On horse-back, sir?"

"Of course."

"Then, sir, begging your parden again, nice yellowish brown dittoes, with gaiters to match, is the soot for to-day. Where shall I find them, sir?"

"I have not got such a thing. The checks will do."

"Of course, sir, they'll do. Anything will do. But I beg your parden for taking the liberty of suggesting that you should send for your tailor, sir, and order a few of 'em. They comes in wonderful handy in the country. Lord Ronald, as I was staying with last, had half a dozen of 'em. These checks of yours, sir, is very delicate. They're beautiful, of course—what

any nobleman would be proud to wear, but they're more like Kempton or Sandown, sir, than this country."

Geoffrey was interested—deeply interested. Pewter was evidently an intelligent being. At first he had thought that, possibly, his guardian was setting a species of spy on him, and was inclined to resent it, and to say that he would have a servant of his own choosing. But now Pewter appeared in altogether a new and far more valuable light. He had ideas about dress, and these were apparently sound. He must be consulted. The suggestion that a tailor should be sent for from London was a brilliant one, and should be acted on without loss of time. But perhaps Colonel Neville might object. He would see.

The Colonel did not object at all, when Geoffrey explained that he had been so busy about the horses, and ordering his hunting kit, that he had had no time to attend to his ordinary dress, which required some additions. Tom Kirk suggested a good man, and a telegram was at once despatched.

Geoffrey had also been nervous about the nags. Perhaps, after all, he had made a mistake; and at first the Colonel pulled rather a wry face over Kildare's legs. But when Geoffrey produced a balance of fifty pounds which was left out of the sum placed at his disposal for the purchase of the horses, and explained that he had thought it better to buy a useful screw at first, his guardian was delighted.

"An old head on young shoulders, Kirk," he said to his friend, privately. "Any other fellow of his age would have brought a couple of flat-catchers home. I quite expected it, and was prepared to lose the money. But you see the lad has picked out a couple as useful nags as you could have laid your hands on yourself."

"He has paid too much for them," grumbled Tom.

"They don't stand in much over a hundred, including their fares down. No doubt you or I might have obtained them for a few pounds less, but that's not worth talking about. That mare strikes me as a real good one."

"She looks all right," said Mr. Kirk; "but wait till you see her with hounds."

"We shall, to-morrow," replied the Colonel. "They're at Wrottesmoor."

"I hope he's not been taken in. But I admit that, anyhow, there's not much harm done, and Geoffrey has bought well enough."

"Yes. He may be a little uncouth," continued the Colonel; "but he's got his wits about him, and we shall soon rub the corners off."

"For your sake I will if I can," thought Mr. Kirk. "But these corners will want a deal of rubbing."

Geoffrey had gone to his room to dress for the ordeal of a country dinner-party, which he feared and hated, and was surprised by Mr. Kirk coming in after a discreet knock. Pewter had gone downstairs, so the two were alone.

"Clare," said Mr. Tom, "old Germaine gives very poor dinners, and you're in for a slow evening. But you don't mind obliging the governor, do you?"

"I suppose not," said Geoffrey, rather sullenly.

"Of course not. Well, just listen. If you want to get on all right, just keep your mouth shut. Don't talk more than you can help, and take very little wine."

"Is Germaine's wine bad, then?" asked Geoffrey, innocently.

"Bad? Damnable!" exclaimed Tom, grasping at the suggestion. "But don't whisper a word of my advice. You'll get awfully bad if you drink it; and as to talking, why they're country folk, and very different from London people, you know. They're dreadfully touchy, and they'd be offended at a lot of things that you and I would not mind a bit."

"All right!" exclaimed Geoffrey. "I'll be careful. Much obliged to you."

The young man's appearance was just as dazzling as it had been at the Gaiety, only the flower at his button-hole was more modest. Pewter was not dissatisfied, for his code contained no

"Is Germaine's wine bad, then?"

rule against masher collars; the Colonel was amazed, and Kirk thought that the youth looked an awful idiot. Things went off very well. Mrs. Germaine thought the young man very shy, for he merely answered yes or no to her many kind questions; her daughter put him down as stupid, and Mr. Germaine considered him very abstemious. Geoffrey was very glad when dinner was over. He then made acquaintance with Mr. Seaton Delaval, and that gentleman, who was quite at home at the Germaines', took him into the smoking-room, and talked about horses and racing with him and young Molesworth, till the Colonel summoned him to go home. Geoffrey had not come out very brilliantly, but he had neither done nor said anything dreadful. The Colonel would not have admitted that he had ever feared anything; but in reality he had been nervous lest some slangy expression should scandalise his friends, and was greatly relieved at the result.

"Germaine ought really to keep a better cook," remarked Mr. Kirk, on their way home. "Why doesn't he get one like Allnutt's?"

"I suppose he can't afford it," said the Colonel.

"Pooh! It is not a question of money at all. A good cook is cheapest in the end. A bad cook spoils more in a week than the whole difference of wages."

"Ladies don't take that view," remarked Neville.

"Of course not. Women all go in for economy, but they go in for economy in the wrong way. They don't see that if you have one dish well done, it will be a great deal cheaper than two ill-cooked ones."

"Especially if your one dish is *paté de foie gras* from Strasburg," remarked Colonel Neville.

"Yes, even so," observed Mr. Kirk. "Now could anything be worse than that thing they called a *financière* of fowl?"

"I did not notice it!" said Geoffrey.

"Not notice it! I am astonished at you, Clare. The cocks-combs were underdone and tough, the mushrooms were nasty, the truffles were mere bits of leather, and the whole was

greasy. Now would not a neat, simple *fricassée* have been a good deal better and much cheaper?"

"I suppose so," assented the Colonel.

"Of course it would. With such a cook as that, only a very simple bill of fare should be attempted. Give me a light, please."

And Mr. Kirk relapsed into silence, exhaling the smoke from his nose, and thinking of the sins committed by the Germaines' cook.

Geoffrey's scarlet coat did not arrive in time for the next day at Wrottesmoor, so he appeared in the best that Pewter could do for him—a plain suit of dittoes of Pewter's own, which had formerly been Lord Ronald's, and which the ingenious servant induced his new master to wear on the plea that he had borrowed them from the Colonel, who knew nothing about it. They did not leave the Hall till nearly ten, but Mr. Kirk was not ready even then. He caught them up half way to the meet, remarking:

"That was a capital grill this morning, Neville. You missed its beauties by being in such a hurry. Whatever else I may miss, I don't like missing my breakfast."

"Have you ever done such a thing?" asked the Colonel.

"Once or twice, I'm sorry to say. But never again; no, never again."

Wrottesmoor was a tiny hamlet on the slope of a bleak hillside, about half a mile to the right of the Warboro' and Whitfield turnpike road. Being within easy reach of Bancaster, it was a meet generally well attended, particularly by those who preferred a gallop over the hills with their large sweep of heather or turf, and easy fences where turf and heather ceased, to the stiff jumps and heavy pasture of the vale. Geoffrey had had a taste of the downs on Amberwitch; to-day, on his new purchase, he felt decidedly less nervous and more comfortable. For a trysting place, on a windy February morning, Wrottesmoor was too exposed. There was no hospitable mansion to dispense cherry brandy; no friendly screen of trees to serve as a shelter

against the biting wind, which swept up from the valley in keen gusts. Yet there were a few carriages drawn up in the open road, and among them Colonel Neville speedily recognized Mrs. Germaine's phaeton.

"Glad to see that you have come notwithstanding the cold, Mrs. Germaine," said he, while Geoffrey bowed silently. "I was afraid that you would not care to face the wind."

"I have driven Lucy and Frank over," answered the lady. "They sent their horses on, so as to sit wrapped up snugly as long as they could. Now I shall go home directly they throw off."

"We are much obliged to you for an excellent dinner, Mrs. Germaine," said Tom Kirk, unblushingly.

"Mr. Kirk, I know you too well," answered Mrs. Germaine, shaking her head. "I do not believe in your compliments. You are so dreadfully difficult to please, that I would never ask you at all, if it were not for Colonel Neville."

"Mrs. Germaine," replied Mr. Kirk, "your mere presence would suffice to satisfy men far more difficult to please than myself. How can I even think of dinner when you grace the table?"

"Don't talk nonsense. I know our cook is not up to your standard. Will you come over and give us a lesson, some day?"

"The little knowledge I possess is quite at your disposal," replied Mr. Kirk. "Eating is so important a matter that no attention devoted to it can, by a wise man, be considered wasted."

"Oh, Mr. Kirk, what a dreadful theory!" said Lucy Germaine, who rode up at that moment. "It is so humiliating to devote so much attention to mere eating!"

"Not at all, Miss Germaine," replied Kirk. "Think only of the gratification you give thereby to your fellow-creatures!"

"Oh," answered Lucy, "it is horrid that people should think so much about their dinner! It lowers one to the level of animals."

"Lucy," exclaimed Mrs. Germaine, "you are not polite."

"Never mind Kirk," interrupted the Colonel. "I am glad you are giving the old epicure a bit of your mind, Lucy."

"But Miss Germaine is entirely wrong," said Kirk. "Of course at her charming age she thinks nothing of eating and drinking. Her proper food is ambrosia, and that sort of thing—perhaps love, when the right young man comes——"

"Tom," remarked the Colonel, "you're an ass." Mr. Kirk went on, not heeding the interruption.

"For us mature men, however, there are few joys surpassing the intellectual pleasures of the table!"

"Intellectual," exclaimed Miss Germaine—"the idea!" Geoffrey was getting very cold, and wondered how people could go on talking such nonsense in a biting wind.

"Exactly. Intellectual. Our appreciation of a delicate dish is in precise proportion to the cultivation of our intellect. The animal swallows everything without any distinction."

"Pippin likes sugar better than oats!" said Lucy again.

"Because sugar is sweet. But do you think Pippin would enjoy a lovely French *bon-bon* any more than an ordinary lump of sugar?"

"Perhaps not," admitted Lucy.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Kirk. "But his mistress would. I think."

Here Mr. Kirk produced from the capacious pocket of his wide-frocked hunting-coat a small box of sweets, which he gallantly offered to Miss Lucy.

"Take a couple," said he, "and then I will give them to your mother. Will you have some cherry brandy—just a little drop to warm you?"

"No, thank you," replied Lucy, laughing. "I am pretty comfortable, though I wish they would move on. You have irresistible arguments in your pocket, Mr. Kirk. But *bon-bons* are, after all, far more delicate than your nasty meats, and games, and cheeses! Ugh!" With these words she pouted up her pretty lips, and gave a good imitation of a shudder,

which was perhaps not entirely pretence, as the wind was blowing keenly. "And," she added, "I am not *always* thinking about sweets."

"I wonder," said Kirk, "whether it is more intellectual to think about pretty dresses or nice dishes!"

"HAVE YOU SEEN THE HOUNDS?"

"Horrid!" exclaimed Lucy. "I never think about my frocks at all."

"And yet," remarked Colonel Neville, gallantly, "everything you wear suits you. Whereas, I conclude——"

"My dear Colonel, don't turn that child's head," interrupted

Mrs. Germaine. "Mr. Clare," she asked, anxious to bring the youth into the conversation, "you like hunting, of course?"

"When it is not so beastly cold," replied Geoffrey, who was very cross.

"It *is* dull waiting for them to go on," said Mrs. Germaine, good-naturedly. "That is a very nice horse you're riding."

"I bought her in London last week," said Geoffrey, proudly.

"The hounds are moving off!" cried the Colonel. "Good-bye, Mrs. Germaine." Lucy was off like a shot, so Pippin showed that he was right again. "Go home, now, it is very cold. Come on, Geoffrey."

Gorse after gorse was drawn, but the wind was so keen that hounds could make nothing of it. People galloped about on the downs to keep themselves warm, and there seemed no chance of running a fox on the hills, even if they found one. So at last fresh orders were given, and not unwillingly, the cavalcade turned to draw through the sheltered Whitfield coverts. Even here they were at first unsuccessful.

"It is going to be a blank day," observed Geoffrey to the Hon. Mr. Seaton Delaval, whose society he preferred to that of ladies.

"We found a fox in Marcus' gorse," said Mr. Delaval, "but how could we run him in that beastly wind?"

"Of course not," answered Geoffrey, "but we ought to do better here."

"Anyhow, you can't call it quite a blank," said Mr. Seaton Delaval, lighting his fifth cigar. "Are you going to ride at Sandown?"

"No," replied Geoffrey. "I don't see anything likely, except mounts that are already engaged."

The fact was, of course, that Geoffrey had not been asked to ride. But then that is an admission which no young man who thinks anything of his riding cares to make.

"Had we not better get on?" asked the Honourable Seaton, as he noticed Colonel Neville and a couple more of the knowing

ones move off at a trot from the glade where the group had been standing, and thread their way through the trees.

"No use scratching one's face for nothing," said Geoffrey, who knew no more of hunting than an owl, and objected to being carried under overhanging branches and through brambles in the pursuit of an animal he cared nothing about. "I don't believe there's a fox here, and if there is, they can't run him."

Some of that numerous class who go out hunting at least once a week during the season, but never learn to ride to hounds, were deterred from following Neville through the wood. The sight of a red-coated gentleman and the young heir placidly smoking their cigars was enough to convince these votaries of the chase that "they were all right." After a time, Geoffrey and his friend leisurely picked up their reins and sauntered down the main ride towards the west end of Whitfield Woods. Not until they had reached the extremity of the extensive coverts did either of them realise that the hounds were no longer in them. Then the group who had, so far, followed them submissively began to ask questions, as snobs generally do when they fancy that they are being led the right way and then find out that the leaders themselves know no more than they do.

"Where are the hounds?" asked one.

"Don't know, I am sure," replied Mr. Seaton Delaval, while Geoffrey only stared superciliously at the questioner, whom he suspected of being a mere cad.

"Why I thought you knew all about it!" grumbled another.

"More fool you!" muttered Geoffrey, while his friend, who was good-natured, said: "They have probably gone on towards Abbey Wood. We shall pick them up there directly."

"Sure to be gone to Abbey Wood," murmured some one else in assent.

Just then one of the party caught sight of an old man, a farm-labourer almost beyond the years of regular work, who had been

collecting firewood in the Whitfield coverts, and was now painfully dragging his bundle home. There was a shout of—

"Have you seen the hounds?"

"Aye, that a' have," was the reply, in a squeaky, quavering voice.

"Where are they?" roared Mr. Delaval.

"A' doan't know where they be's now."

"Old fool!" growled Geoffrey. "When did you see them?"

"About half an hour agone."

"Were they on a fox?"

"Aye! He was a rare old 'un, he was. A see'd him meself, crossin' the ride here."

"Had they found?"

"The daägs had found him, to be sure! They was making a foine noise."

"Which way did they go?" asked Mr. Delaval, now thoroughly aroused.

"Straight across there, toward High Cliffe. They went away fast, too."

No more was necessary for Mr. Delaval's information. Throwing a gate open, he put his horse into a gallop and followed the direction indicated, across the deep ploughed field which bordered the wood. It was easy to see the track of the horses in the holding ground. Gates were open, and gaps made by the more forward riders handy enough, till they reached the wide pastures which lie between the Downs and Clayford. Here the grass told fewer tales, and the jumps wanted doing. But Mr. Delaval still held on, scarcely pausing to pull his horse together, when a bigger rasper than usual was before him.

The pace was tremendous. Seaton Delaval, who had talked of Sandown, had really ridden more than once there and elsewhere, and a three-mile steeplechase was nothing very startling to him. He sat down over the grass and sent his bay ("about as thoroughbred as they make 'em," to use his own words) at the fences just as if they had been galloping between the flags.

Geoffrey's mare was keen enough, and she did her best to keep up with the leader. She was fast enough for a short distance, and somehow her rider felt more confidence than ever before. The rapid gallop quickened his pulses and shortened his breath; but for a minute or two he forgot the danger of tumbling off, and the disagreeables of not being able to hold one's horse in the intoxication of the chase.

Still Delaval held on in front, and still our hero managed to cling to the saddle. In ten minutes he jumped into a lane, with Geoffrey, nearly blown, and rather sick of it, but sticking to the mare like a man, a few lengths in his rear, and the rest of the sportsmen dotted at wide intervals over the track. A moment's glance down the lane showed Delaval the foot-marks pointing for High Cliffe, and he stormed down the rough road regardless of loose stones and the chance of a cropper.

The lane debouched into the Warboro' and Clayford turnpike road, and exactly facing it was a fair ditch which had evidently been freshly jumped by more than one horse, for the hedge was broken down and the banks had been trodden by many hoofs. It was now an easy passage, almost wide enough for a carriage and pair. Up the big grass field beyond, Delaval rode at racing speed, and here Geoffrey felt the mare going weaker under him. She was far inferior to his friend's mount both in condition and in power. Thus, when Delaval had arrived near the white gate on the top, Geoffrey was not half way up the ascent. He saw a couple of men at the gate, heard a shout, and then caught sight of his friend's bay rising high in the air and clearing the gate at a bound.

"Just like Delaval," thought he; "would not even wait for the gate to be opened. Get on, you brute," he cried, addressing his steed. "I won't ask you to jump it, don't be afraid."

"Open the gate, will you!" he shouted, when he was within ear shot.

There was an old man standing at the gate post, armed with a pitchfork. Another man, younger and bigger, was brandishing

a big stick. Neither of them made any show of unfastening the substantial five-barred impediment, which was securely chained up.

"What do you mean by riding over my fields? Why don't you stick to the roads?" asked the older man, roughly.

"I am not doing any harm. I'm after the hounds," said Geoffrey, much surprised and rather alarmed.

"A fine huntsman you are!" sneered the farmer; "hounds agone five-and-thirty minutes ago, and you come spoiling the grass after 'em."

"Five-and-thirty minutes ago?" asked he, aghast.

"Aye, all that. If they hadn't been going so darned quick I'd have stopped the first lot. But I ain't going to let you through, I ain't."

Meanwhile the younger man had moved round to the lower side, and Geoffrey was between two enemies. Both flourished their weapons menacingly. Should he boldly put his mare at the gate? But his heart failed him.

"Why don't you ride at it like a man?" sneered the farmer again. "Your friend did. Hopped over beautiful. I never thought he'd do it, or I'd have knocked him down."

Meanwhile a few more labourers had assembled, each armed with some formidable weapon supplied by the rural arsenal.

"I'll go back, if you won't let me go on," said Geoffrey at last.

"No you won't," cried the farmer. "Trample more holes in the grass, would ye, and make that there gap bigger? What's your name? I'll summon you, as sure as I'm Mr. Golding."

"I am Geoffrey Clare, of Castle Clare," replied he, proudly, hoping that the magic of the name would conjure the gate open.

"Then Geoffrey Clare, of Castle Clare, you ought to know better than to gallop over a poor man's fields when there's no occasion. I won't have a lot of dogs and horses and jackanapes in red coats riding over my place, I can tell you."

"But you don't expect me to stop here all night, do you?"

asked Geoffrey, looking about for a loophole of escape. There was a formidable gate in an impossible fence in front; on the right a big black bullfinch, concealing every possible contingency behind it. To the left the pasture stretched away to a double post and rails in the distance; behind him was the gap through which he had come. Several horsemen now popped over it and pulled up, evidently puzzled. Three of Geoffrey's opponents moved off to intercept them.

"I doan't know whether you'll stop here all night, Geoffrey Clare, of Castle Clare," said Mr. Golding, "but you'll have to pay the damage if you want to get away."

Now generosity was not Geoffrey's speciality; and the idea of being generous under bodily fear was revolting to him. He again looked round cautiously. The bullfinch appeared to be the only chance.

"I shall jump the hedge and make a big hole if you don't open the gate," he said to the farmer.

But Golding only grinned. "I'd like to see you try," remarked the younger man.

Geoffrey was nettled. He suddenly struck spurs to the mare, who had by that time recovered her wind, and darted forward like a shot straight at the formidable blackthorn. He knocked over the young man in his charge, and rose to the fence like a lion. But the thorns were too thick and too much intertwined. Mare and rider stuck in the middle. Poor Geoffrey was knocked off, his coat held by an envious branch, his face was scratched, and spur caught in a twig; the gallant mare struggled forward, and ended by falling sideways on a mass of broken briars, which cut her side and made her struggle violently.

"Shall us knock him down, feyther?" asked the younger man, rushing up with his big stick.

"No. Just pull him out and bring him here," said Mr. Golding, laughing loud. "Jump the fence, would yer? I guess we make 'em pretty strong in Bankshire."

Two labourers hauled the unfortunate youth out, jeering and guffawing incessantly. Relieved of her rider's weight

the mare freed herself, and Mr. Golding led her back triumphantly.

"You deserve a thundering licking," said Mr. Golding; "but I won't take the law into my own hands."

"Well, then," replied Geoffrey, humbly, "then let me go, and summon me. You know my name and address."

"Who says it's the right one?" asked the old farmer, putting his tongue in his cheek. "Maybe you're no more Geoffrey Clare than I am."

"How dare you?" asked the victim, angrily. "How can you doubt my word?"

"I've known bigger swells than you tell lies," answered Mr. Golding. The remark was greeted with another loud guffaw by his acolytes.

"However," he went on, "I ain't going all the way to Clayford to get a summons agin yer. It ain't worth the time and trouble. Just pay for the damage you've done my grass and my hedge and go your ways, only don't come galloping over my fields again or I'll give you a good licking."

"How much?" asked Geoffrey, who did not relish the idea of paying, but liked the notion of being kept at Mr. Golding's farm all night still less. "Five shillings?"

"Five shillings!" laughed the farmer, scornfully. "It'll take more'n that to mend this last hole you've made, let alone the gap down there, and all these tailors galloping across my best grass. You'll have to pay three sovereigns, Squire Clare, if you mean to get back to dinner to-day."

"Absurd!" said Geoffrey. "Why it's downright robbery!"

"And it ain't robbery, I suppose, to destroy a man's grass, that he wants to pay his rent with? No, in course, that's a gentleman's amusement, *that* is. And when a poor man asks for proper compensation it's robbery. Are you going to pay them three sovereigns, or ain't you?"

"Certainly not," answered the victim, firmly.

"All right, then. Boys, lock him into the tool shed, and one of you tie that horse up in the yard. By-and-by Jack

shall ride it to Clayford pound. Found trespassing; owner unknown; calls hisself Geoffrey Clare. No occypation, 'cept galloping over poor people's fields."

A seventy-guinea hunter in Clayford pound, after a fast gallop, what a horrible idea! But Geoffrey had not much time to think about his mare, for while he was still staring at Mr. Golding in blank amazement, six stalwart arms seized him and dragged him off through the gate, which the old man now held wide open.

"Don't hurt him!" cried the farmer. "Them young gents is very delicate, and we don't want to commit no assault. They're not hurting ye, are they, sir?" he asked, in tones of assumed concern, as the young man was dragged across the muck-yard. Geoffrey was too angry, and too busy struggling, to reply. But his struggles were vain. In another minute he found himself in a small apartment—a lean-to of the stables—in company with a harrow, a plough, several spades, and some old sacks. The door was locked upon him, and he was left to solitude and his own reflections.

He heard shouts of laughter in the yard, and then nothing more. Probably the party had gone into the house to dinner. In a few minutes his violent anger cooled down, and gave way to a feeling of bitter but quiet desperation. In another quarter of an hour he began to shiver, for it was a draughty, cold place, and he had been very hot from his gallop and his quarrel. He knocked loudly on the boards which formed the wall. There was no answer to his summons. He attempted to wrench one off, but it resisted his efforts. He thought of prizing a couple of planks off with the spade, but then what about his mare? She was either safe under lock and key, or already on the way to Clayford pound. What a disgusting situation to be in! How Delaval and his guardian and Tom Kirk would laugh if they knew it. He would bring an action for assault, battery, and wrongful detention against the farmer. No, he would not, for then the whole country side would ring with the story. By the dim light which trickled through the

chinks he looked at his battered hat, Mr. Pewter's whilom beautiful coat torn and mangled, his right spur twisted, and one of his boots almost cut in two. It was horrible. He was getting so beastly cold, too. A pull from the flask would be welcome.

At last he heard footsteps. Then the old man's voice came from outside.

"Look 'ere, governor. I don't bear no malice. If you just hand over two sovereigns, and say before witnesses that you give it willing, to compensate for the damage, I'll let you out and give you your horse."

"It's far too much," replied Geoffrey. "I'll give you a pound—not a penny more."

"Very well, just as you please. Then Jack shall take the horse over to Clayford, and you can walk home when you've changed your mind about paying. Jack," he cried, "just bring that mare out, and go over to the pound with her."

Jack was heard running off in obedience to the order.

Geoffrey reflected a moment, and felt in his pockets. He had the amount required, and something over. Just then the farmer left the door, and moved off.

"Wait a minute," called out Geoffrey, from his prison.

"Well," said Golding, stopping.

"I'll give you thirty shillings."

"Two sovereigns—not a penny less. Go on, Jack, the gent prefers walking. It ain't more 'un seven miles to the 'All, he says."

Too true; it was a very long seven miles, and Geoffrey knew it. He heard the mare's step, as she was brought out.

"Shorten the stirrups a bit, my boy," said the old man, "you ain't got such long legs as the Squire. And mind you don't fall off."

"Hallo, there!" said poor Geoffrey.

"What is it?" asked the old man.

"I'll pay!" said the humiliated youth.

"Two sovereigns?" asked Golding.

"Have a leg up, Sir?"

"Two sovereigns, but it's an infernal swindle."

"Go on, Jack," was the farmer's only answer. "The gent calls us swindlers. He won't give it willing."

"Oh, anything you like!" shouted Geoffrey. "Stop my mare!"

"Do you give it willing, to pay for damage done?" asked Golding.

"Yes, I give it willingly," muttered Geoffrey, cursing between his teeth.

"Come here, boys, and hear what he says," cried the farmer. "Now, governor, speak up. You're giving me two sovereigns of your own free will for damage done, ain't you?"

"Yes," said Geoffrey, quite beaten.

"Say so, then, like a man, if you are one."

"What am I to say?" asked poor Geoffrey.

"Say, 'I'm willing to pay two sovereigns for the damage I've done to this poor man's field and fences. And I'm glad he don't bring an action against me for trespass.'"

The young man's blood boiled with the indignity, but he repeated the words. The door was then unlocked, and he found himself confronted by the whole party, still armed in case of any further attempt at flight. But Geoffrey was now too utterly wretched to have any pluck left. He handed over two pounds to his gaoler, who put them in his pocket.

"Much better than a summons," he said. "No use going to law. What's the good of quarrelling? Jack, bring the Squire's horse round. Have a leg up, sir?" he asked, sarcastically, seeing that Geoffrey was so cold and stiff that he could scarcely move.

But the young man silently beckoned him off, climbed on to his mare somehow, and, while the bumpkins grinned, and old Golding assumed an attitude of pretended respect, rode out of the yard:

"—— *quantum mutatus ab illo*
Hectore . . . ."

"Wait half a minute," shouted Golding, "and have a drop of something warm, sir."

Was it irony, or pity for Geoffrey's miserable plight? Anyhow, the victim took no notice, though the offer was tempting. He rode on sternly and silently, nor did he look for the hounds again on that day.

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CHAPTER XIII.

OVER THE VALE.

Pewter sympathised greatly with his young master, helped him to undress, and abused "them rascally farmers," but when at dinner Geoffrey related his misadventure with much indignation, he was infinitely annoyed to find that Colonel Neville only smiled, and advised him to leave matters alone, while Mr. Kirk burst into a fit of laughter which threatened to spoil his dinner.

"Upon my word," exclaimed he, "it's about the best thing I ever heard. This *vol-au-vent* is not quite up to the mark, but Geoffrey's story would make me eat leg of mutton with the greatest pleasure! Oh dear! oh dear! So you 'gave it willing,' did you, Geoffrey?"

"The fellow ought to be prosecuted," rejoined the young man, angrily.

"Leave law alone, my boy," said the Colonel. "Recollect, we have no legal right at all to ride over a farmer's land."

"But fancy locking me up, and threatening to take the mare to the pound!" exclaimed Geoffrey.

Mr. Kirk roared again, while the Colonel said—

"Rather high-handed, no doubt; but you were a trespasser, and had, strictly speaking, no more right to gallop over his land than he would have to come trampling over my flower-beds with his cob."

Perhaps Geoffrey would have taken his guardian's advice and swallowed the insult put upon him, if Mr. Kirk had been able to refrain from laughter, and his acquaintances in the hunting field had not chaffed him on the very next hunting day. When they met at the Dene Cross Roads, Mr. Pebbles asked the young squire, with a sly twinkle in his eye, "how he got on with farmer Gold-

ing." Then, when Geoffrey turned away angrily, he added in a tone which was meant to be apologetic, but only added fuel to the fire, "No offence, sir; you should have jumped the gate like Mr. Delaval, and then there would have been no rumpus." The latter sportsman said, innocently enough:—

"Hallo, Clare, how are you? How did you get out of that beastly farmyard the other day? We had a capital stern chase, hadn't we? But I did not see you again with hounds."

Before they had drawn the first cover, the tale was all over the place, and Geoffrey made up his mind that no one else could have told but Mr. Kirk. That that gentleman was not quite guiltless our readers can imagine. The story was, in his opinion, too good to be lost, and it went the round of squires, men from town, farmers and ladies, till, with a good many embellishments, it reached Mr. and Lucy Germaine's ears. By that time it was boldly stated that Geoffrey had been threatened with tarring and feathering, and that he only saved himself from this awful fate by paying twenty pounds. The good-natured girl, with the best intentions, asked Geoffrey to tell her all about it. In relating his tale, his face flushed with anger, and, forgetting the reverence due to girls, he wound up by saying he would summon that d——d fellow Golding at any cost.

Lucy was shocked and relieved at one and the same time, while her father could not help joining in the laugh.

"After all," said Lucy, "it was not so bad, and you need not be so *very* angry, Mr. Clare. You were only shut up for a few minutes, and you did not have to pay such a dreadful lot. Perhaps the poor man's fields *were* damaged, and you might have jumped the gate, you know."

This last straw was too much for Geoffrey. From Lucy at least he had expected sympathy, for she and her mother had been so consistently kind to him, that although he was a bumptious fellow, and thought that civility and attention were always due to him, he had noticed their friendliness, and appreciated it at least to some extent. But now they also turned against him, so he sulkily withdrew from the rest, meditating vengeance. When,

after some delay, a fox was at last on foot, he determined to show the Bankshire people that he was not quite the duffer they took him for. Scarcely had the welcome cry of "Gone away!" broke the echoes, when there was the usual rush of eager horsemen to the front, but even the hardest men turned off into a lane instead of taking what appeared to be no very formidable jump into the next field. Geoffrey thought that this was a good opportunity of redeeming his character as a bold rider. He would be well within view of the people if he charged the fence, and as even Seaton Delaval had turned from it (funked it, he thought), it would be a feather in his cap to get over, even with a fall. Hounds were streaming across the next field, wildly racing for the lead; their music had already subsided, and even the laggards, puppies who scarcely knew what it all meant, and had loitered in the wood sniffing after rabbits, now strained every nerve to catch their more experienced comrades. Sir Ralph, the master, was galloping along the lane, with all the best men of Bankshire. So boldly spurring Kildare, Geoffrey rode at the fence, the only one to face it. As he came nearer, it appeared still less difficult than he had thought; the old horse did not hesitate, and almost took it in his stride. To say that his rider was pleased with himself would be far less than the truth. Geoffrey mentally hugged himself, and not having landed on his horse's head as he had done too often before, was especially delighted, and wondered why none of the others had ventured to ride at the obstacle. His pleasure and his wonder were destined to be of short duration. Scarcely was he comfortable in his saddle (for, however small a jump, it always disturbed his seat), when he heard a loud cry of "Ware wheat! Ware wheat!" from many voices. Could the shout be intended for him? Could that lovely field he was riding over, where the grass was so very green, and grew in such beautiful lines, really be a wheat field? Geoffrey's knowledge of agricultural matters was of the slightest, and a horrible doubt came over him. When Mr. Snow, a farmer who was generally very respectful, yelled from the other side of the hedge, "Come out of that, you young fool!" even Geoffrey's doubts were set at rest, and somewhat

crestfallen, he rode round the edge of the field to the nearest gate, which of course he fumbled at, and which no one of the hurrying crowd volunteered to open. Then he dropped his crop, and was obliged to get off to pick it up. He led his horse through the gate, and smothered his boots in mud, for the ground

"THEN HE DROPPED HIS CROP."

was sadly pouched. This was an aggravation of misfortune, for though Geoffrey was not yet a great sportsman, he had always been a very smart dresser, and Pewter had really turned him out very respectably now his hunting clothes had arrived from London. To have his beautiful new boots plastered up to the very tops thus early in the day, was trying, nor was this an end of his troubles. The old horse would not stand still for him to get on. The last of the field were galloping up the lane, and

sniffing the battle from afar, the gallant steed strove to join in the fray, nor would he wait for his young master to get into the saddle. "Woho, old man," said Geoffrey, in his most persuasive tones, but they only resulted in the horse breaking into a trot before he got his foot up to the stirrup. "Gently, boy, gently," said Geoffrey again, but Kildare danced round in a circle, his head being the centre. Then the young man tried stronger measures and stronger language. "D——n you, stand still, you brute!" and a cut from the whip, were of no effect; on the contrary, it looked very much as if the horse would get away altogether, and join in the hunt on his own account. Meanwhile the sound of the horn, and the cheery cries of "Forrard! forrard!" grew faint in the distance, and the lark, rising heavenward, could once more make his carol heard. Geoffrey, however, was in no mood to listen to the lark's sweet song. His temper grew rapidly worse, and he would have administered a severe chastisement to his horse for not standing still, if he had not been afraid of his heels and his forefeet. At that moment some boys came running up. They had stood at the further side of the cover, and had successfully headed the fox several times, as boys always do, and when he at last broke in the opposite direction, had a long run through the wood.

"Here, hold my horse, one of you!" said Geoffrey; and in half a minute he was in the saddle. Now or never!

He felt that he must catch the hounds, or his character as a sportsman would be gone. To be thrown out on two successive days would never do. Tom Kirk would not leave him in peace for an hour. Hang Tom Kirk! And as to the rest, they were all a set of stuck-up folks, always ready to laugh at a fellow. So Geoffrey tore along, for he could always make the running along a road. Soon, however, it struck him that it was no use sticking to the lane as, perhaps, the field had turned off somewhere. He could see no one in front; the delay had been so long that they must have already topped the crest of the opposite hill. He slackened his pace, looking out for some one from whom to inquire.

"Have you seen the hounds?" he called out to an old man with a donkey-cart.

"Ha'e a seed the hounds?" repeated the man.

"Yes," answered Geoffrey, emphatically. "Where are they?"

"They be gone over Donnington way," replied the old chap, after a long think, pointing vaguely with his whip in several directions at once.

As far as Geoffrey's local knowledge was concerned, 'Donnington way' might be anywhere. However, he gathered that he ought to turn off to the right as soon as possible, and galloped on, looking out for a friendly lane in that direction, as he had no especial fancy for much fencing over an unknown country after an invisible pack of hounds.

Now Dene Cross Roads was near to Molesworth, and it was from Molesworth Littlewood that they had brought their fox. He was an old one, and being headed back in his efforts to reach the extensive covers on the other side of Molesworth park, had made a bold bid and faced the open country. Probably, Geoffrey would not have heard nor seen anything of hounds again on that day if a team of horses ploughing had not turned Reynard from his point. This was our hero's chance. He was about to turn down a green lane to the right, when he espied a red coat in front of him, and pushing on, soon reached the road, where the whole field was assembled while the huntsman tried back.

Geoffrey hung on the outskirts of the crowd, hoping to remain unobserved. But young Molesworth, the owner of the wood where they had found their fox, spotted him in a moment, and not being particularly good-natured nor very sweet-tempered, rode up to him, and said:

"Mr. Clare, perhaps another time you will be good enough not to ride over my farmers' wheat. If you do that sort of thing, we shall have to ask you to stay at home."

Geoffrey was very angry, and forgot to conceal his ignorance.

"I didn't know it was wheat," he blurted out, getting very red in the face.

"Then you ought to. The sooner you go back to school, the better," said Molesworth, sharply: for he was fond of snubbing people. Geoffrey was certainly a tempting object for a snub.

Colonel Neville overheard this last remark. "Just for a time you had better pick out some good man and follow him—at a respectful distance, of course: you will soon learn to take your own line, Geoffrey," said he.

"Very well, sir," said Geoffrey, concealing his anger. As if he could not take a line of his own, but required a pilot like a little boy or a weak woman! "Whom shall I follow?"

"Oh, any one. There's Newton, for instance; he goes hard enough to please the best: or Delaval; you could not do better than Delaval: he won't lead you into mischief, which Newton might."

Geoffrey had had quite enough of following Delaval. It was this wretched Seaton Delaval who had landed him in the trap the other day. So he quickly resolved to follow no other than the Colonel himself. "See if I don't wipe his eye for him," thought he. "He's as rough as the rest. Down on a man like a sledge hammer for nothing at all."

Now, however, Sir Ralph sounded his horn. "I believe," he said, "that that fox has made his point for our own woods," and jumping the little hedge on the side of the road, he rapidly threw them forward in a great curve.

Newton, Mr. Delaval, and a few other "hard ones" at once jumped off to look to their girths. For if the fox had really made his point to Branscombe woods, there would be a long gallop through the deepest part of the Warboro' Vale. It was an unusual line for a fox to take, and one not much liked, for the ground was heavy, the ditches were wide, and the railway and river had both to be crossed. Still hounds had run from Molesworth to Branscombe before, and they might do so again. The real cream of the country was higher up, beyond Warboro', where the marshy land ceased and gave place to sweet meadows, and where blackthorn fences took the place of the too frequent rails of this southern portion of the valley. Of all this, however,

Geoffrey knew nothing, but with a firm determination to redeem his character as a sportsman, jumped the little hedge, and followed the hounds.

Sir Ralph proved to be right. After a little dwelling and feathering, old Ranger gave tongue in his deep bass, and was immediately joined by Larkspur in her treble. Then Warrior and Warlock, always hunting in couples, took it up a few yards further forward, and on those notes the whole pack rushed to the front, and with loud music tore down the side of the hedge, pointing straight for Branscombe. An accommodating line of gates, a slight incline down hill, and alternating firm grass and stubble, made the first few fields easy, and by the time they were crossed, Geoffrey was again on excellent terms with himself. It was not difficult to hold Kildare, who was a clever old hunter, and mindful of his guardian's instructions, Geoffrey allowed the redoubtable grey to show him the way. Soon, however, they reached a field from which no gate led in the desired direction, and Colonel Neville, riding wide on the left of the hounds, galloped straight at the very ordinary fence which bounded it. On his left again, rode pretty Lucy Germaine, while Pippin pricked his ears and quickened his stride when they approached the jump; the grey made nothing of it, and Pippin landed comfortably with several feet to the good; Geoffrey, too, did not come quite on his horse's head this time, but he was so close to the Colonel that if the latter's horse had made the smallest mistake, Kildare must have been on the top of him.

"You need not jump on my back, Geoffrey," said Neville, with the slightest shade of annoyance in his tone. "Give a man room."

Geoffrey pulled vengefully at his curb rein. He could evidently commit nothing but mistakes to-day. He was wrong to take his own line, and now also wrong to follow a pilot, even so experienced a pilot as his guardian. How unreasonable everybody was, to be sure! But hounds did not wait for him to consider what he should do next. They were now running mute, and in the next field all the riders turned away from

them, an example which Geoffrey was wise enough to follow, though wondering.

"Why don't we go on with the hounds?" he asked Mr. Pebbles.

"There's the railway to cross; we've got to go round by the bridge," replied that portly gentleman, who had managed somehow to keep his place, though he never jumped a fence if he could help it.

The railway did not stop hounds. While the field was slowly filing under the low archway of an occupation bridge, their merry music sounded again, and they were away on the far side across the "marshes."

"Mr. Clare," said Pebbles, good-naturedly, while they were still struggling under the railway, "you'd better keep alongside o' me. There's some queer places in these marshes, for one that ain't used to 'em."

"Thank you," replied Geoffrey, boldly; "my horse will jump anything, I am sure."

"Ay—but will his master?" muttered Pebbles, with his tongue in his cheek. "Come up, old man." And away he pounded down a dirty bye-road, followed by the majority, while the bolder spirits turned to the left into a big grass field to join hounds as soon as they might.

It was a very large field, and galloping across it, Geoffrey had time to look about him. Ahead there, down beyond a narrow fence, was the huntsman. Close to him, Sir Ralph. Seaton Delaval, Newton, Carruthers, and Colonel Neville were all riding nearly abreast of each other. On his right was Miss Germaine; behind him were half a dozen more, all good men and true. "If I can stick to this lot," thought Geoffrey, "I shall do all right. But that seems a biggish place before us, by the way the horses take it."

It was nothing very dreadful, however: a low, clean-cut thin hedge in front of an equally clean-cut water ditch. As Kildare cleared it Geoffrey saw the sky reflected beneath him, and for the first time experienced that peculiar sensation which to some small extent resembles hydrophobia. However, he was safely

over, though not without a struggle to keep his seat, and it was with real pleasure that he heard a cry behind him, and looking back, perceived a red coat struggling on the bank, and a horse's head just over the edge of the ditch. There is nothing so pleasant, a cynical philosopher has said, as the misfortunes of one's friends, and Geoffrey felt an inch taller at the consciousness that he had got safely over a jump which had brought another to grief.

"Who was that that fell at the ditch?" asked Colonel Neville of Dr. Charges, a man who always went well.

"Oh, Molesworth!" replied Dr. Charges. "But he's not hurt a bit. He's always tumbling about."

Then swift punishment had overtaken Geoffrey's foe, and he rejoiced greatly.

On they sped, the moist pastures carrying a burning scent. Another ditch was successfully crossed, a very small one this time, and Geoffrey began to think that "The Marshes" were not so difficult to get over, after all. But he began to get a little blown and to entertain a sneaking hope that hounds would soon come to a check—which, for the moment, did not seem at all likely. Kildare was still full of running, and passed Colonel Neville's grey, for the marsh land was heavy, and the Colonel thought a slight pull might be useful.

"The governor's settled!" thought Geoffrey, now but little behind the leading men—Sir Ralph, the huntsman, Seaton Delaval, and Newton. These were almost in line, and in line they rode at another of the familiar ditches, only this time the fence was on the landing side. Three went over safely in their stride, but Delaval's horse stopped, and with an angry exclamation, his rider turned him round and rode at it again, digging the spurs into him. Geoffrey's heart began to fail him as he approached the place. There was a clear and bright bit of water between him and the tight, uncompromising little fence on the far side. Probably it was only about seven or eight feet wide, but seven feet of clear water in a clean-cut ditch, and a fence besides, are nastier than most sporting writers would have

"Went sideways at the ditch."

us think. At any rate, a severe attack of hydrophobia came over him. Reason said, "Go straight at it as hard as you can lick," and reason prevailed. But hydrophobia affected his hands, somehow, and his old horse, a thoroughly experienced animal, found it out too quickly. His head was not held straight—there was more tightening of the off-rein than the near one, and though Kildare did not actually refuse, he swerved slightly, and went sideways at the ditch. Nor was there any effort in his spring; the rider's heart was not thrown over, so the horse did not care much, but jumped souse! into the water, and subsided after a faint struggle.

"Are you hurt, Geoffrey?" said an anxious voice, as our hero scrambled disconsolately to the wrong bank, his hat all battered and hanging behind him by the guard, and the water rushing from his boots as if from a fountain.

"No," said he, crossly. "D—n that horse!"

"It was not the horse's fault," replied the Colonel, who was on the *right* side of the ditch. "You should always go quite straight at these places; they take some doing. Now, don't let your horse struggle to get out. Coax him to walk along the bottom till you find an easy place, and Good luck!"

And with these words, the Colonel galloped off. He was not the man to leave hounds while they were running with a breast-high scent, even though his boy might be unable to join them. The boy was unhurt, and as to the rest, he did not suppose the lad would be able to cross the Ooze even if he got his horse out of that ditch.

It was all very well for Neville to tell him to coax the horse along. Kildare resolutely refused to be coaxed. After a few ineffectual attempts to scramble up the steep sides of the 'drain,' he quietly subsided at the bottom of it. Carruthers, Charges, Lucy Germaine, and the rest had followed the leaders; the last-mentioned did not know who had come to grief and did not stop to inquire: the others, heartlessly, as Geoffrey thought, just called out "Not hurt, I hope?" and rode on.

Soon some farm labourers appeared on the scene.

"It be an awkward place," opined one.

"He'll break his back if he tries to get oot," said a second.

"We'll dig 'un oot for ye," suggested a third, more practical.

"Dig him out?" asked Geoffrey, in surprise.

"Ay! Ye can't get him oot no wise else."

So it appeared, for the banks were far too steep for the horse to obtain a footing on them, and the bottom was too soft for him to obtain a purchase and jump.

"Well, dig him out then," said Geoffrey, who was as cold

"HE MUST LEAVE THE POOR HORSE TO HIS FATE."

and cross as he had been at Farmer Golding's on a previous day, and very wet besides.

"All right, lads," said the practical man. "We'll dig 'en oot for you soon enough. But it's a poond."

"A pound?" asked Geoffrey, aghast. "A sovereign?"

"Ay, twenty shillins, that's oor price in the vaāl, when a gentleman's horse falls into a draāin."

"But it's a swindle," exclaimed Geoffrey, thinking that hunting was a most expensive amusement. "I'll give you ten shillings."

"No. A poond, or nowt."

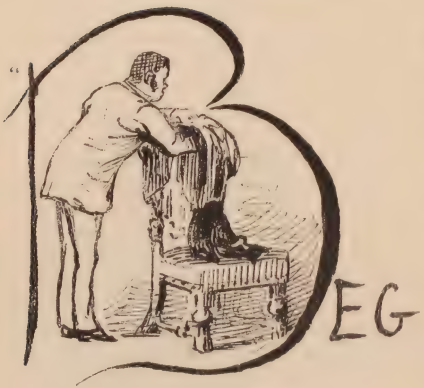
"I will give you a sovereign, then," said Geoffrey, when he saw the horse had made another effort to get out, and fell back groaning; "only dig him out." The men said, "All right," but moved away, and as they did not return, Geoffrey began to think that they were offended, and would no longer help him. He must, he supposed, leave the poor horse to his fate and walk to the nearest farm for help. But while he was still cogitating, the men returned with spades and a coil of rope. Geoffrey had to produce a sovereign, which he did very unwillingly. And they set to work manfully to dig out an inclined plane from the surface of the field to the bottom of the ditch, by which the horse could at last be induced to walk out.

Geoffrey's second day with hounds ended with a twelve-mile ride home in garments and boots saturated with water. He felt that hunting was a mistake. As to that gallant fox, he was pulled down in the open, half a mile short of Branscombe woods, after as fast a forty minutes as had ever been seen in the Warboro' vale. Seven were in at the death, of whom Tom Kirk, who turned up mysteriously from some farmyard, was one, and the Colonel another.

The two latter rode home more in love with hunting than ever.

CHAPTER XIV.

TWO DEPARTURES.



"PARDON, sir," said Pewter obsequiously; "but you'll want more breeches and boots if things goes on like this. That's two pair of breeches and two pair of boots well-nigh spoilt this week."

"D—n hunting!" said Geoffrey; "I think I shall give it up."

"It's a dangerous amusement, certingly," observed Pewter, who was laying out his master's dress clothes for dinner. "But gentlemen mostly likes it. Leastwise, noblemen does, my experience, sir, being mostly with noblemen, axing yer pardin."

"It's beastly expensive," remarked Geoffrey.

"Well, sir, nobody expects to git their fun for nothing; but what does it matter to you, sir? Money ain't no consequence to the Colonel, as *I* know a few sovereigns more or less ain't to be mentioned."

"I wish I had the Colonel's money," grumbled Geoffrey, not

ashamed to express his sentiments before Pewter, who had rapidly succeeded in gaining his confidence.

"I wish you 'ad, sir," said the valet; "you'd make things fly a bit, and 'ave a few choice spirits down 'ere, instead of only the 'ome party. It's mortal dull, to be sure."

"Beastly," assented Geoffrey. "I shall have to go up to town for a few days' change."

"Right you are, sir. It would do you good, I'm sure. And if I might be so bold, sir, begging your pardin, you ought to take me with you, sir, to look after yer clothes, and brandies and sodas, and sich like."

"That's a good idea of yours, Pewter. I'll think it over. It will be a convenience certainly."

"In course it would, sir. A nobleman—beg pardin, sir—a gentleman don't get any what I call real proper attendance in them hotels, not in the best of them. He always wants his vally."

Geoffrey thought Pewter a very intelligent person indeed, and felt rather ashamed that he was not a nobleman. Still Clare of Castle Clare was as good as any nobleman in the land, and it was only a pity that his grandfather had refused a title when it was offered.

Next morning at breakfast Colonel Neville looked very serious when he had read his letters. He paid no attention when Tom Kirk chaffed Geoffrey about his acquaintance with the Bankshire ditches, and retired to his study almost immediately. Geoffrey's morning pipe was interrupted by a message from his guardian, who wished to see him; the young man obeyed the summons, wondering whether the Colonel had perchance heard something of his bill transactions. He quaked inwardly, and was much relieved when a very different communication was made to him.

"I am sorry to say that I shall have to go to Ireland at once, Geoffrey," said the Colonel.

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes; the country is much disturbed; there is a terrible

amount of distress, and my agent, or I should rather say your agent, is evidently far too hard on the tenants. I believe things have been much mismanaged during my long absence in India, and it is high time that they should be set right."

"Don't the people pay their rents?" asked Geoffrey.

"That is part of the trouble, but only the least part. I believe the rents are too high. Mr. Crosby has been evicting them right and left, and I ought to be on the spot to see that justice is done."

"That's what they are always asking for!" exclaimed Geoffrey. "Justice to Ireland! I would give them bayonets and buckshot. They could pay well enough if they chose."

"Indeed?" asked the Colonel. "Is that your experience of the country? I was not aware that you had been in Ireland, Geoffrey. By all means give me the benefit of your knowledge."

"I haven't been there," replied Geoffrey, blushing; "and I don't want to go. But it's what all the fellows say. Why Templar would be a rich man if his rents were paid. He ought to be drawing a thousand a year, and he can't get anything."

"Nothing at all?" asked Colonel Neville. "And, pray, who *is* Templar?"

"Oh! an awfully good fellow, and a great pal of mine," answered the lad. "I should like him to come down here for a few days, if you don't mind. I was going to ask you about it."

"By all means have him down, Geoffrey, if he is a friend of yours. But to return to the subject of Castle Clare, Mr. Crosby has been shot at, and slightly wounded. I must go over at once—by to-night's mail, if possible."

"I would not go if I were you, sir," said Geoffrey. "You'll only be shot at yourself from behind some hedge."

"Perhaps. But I do not think they are likely to try that little game on me; I am not a very easy customer to deal with. However, whether or no, go I must."

As a matter of fact, Geoffrey did not mind his guardian going at all, but was in mortal fear of being asked to go with him. He had no wish to see Castle Clare, nor any desire to become the

target for an evicted tenant. The Manor was dull, but if he could have Templar and Weevil and a few other fellows down occasionally, it would not be so bad, and anyhow Castle Clare would be a great deal worse.

"Would you like to come with me, Geoffrey?" asked Colonel Neville after a pause, with some hesitation in his tone.

"Must I go, sir?"

"Must? No, my boy. There is no *must* in it. Heaven forbid that I should attempt to exercise my authority in that way. I doubt even whether it would not be a great stretch of the privileges the law allows me. In no case should I think of forcing you to do something which seems so very distasteful to you."

"Thank you, sir," said Geoffrey heartily.

"You and Tom Kirk will keep house together while I am away," continued the Colonel, swallowing his disappointment; "and I hope you won't be very dull. Ask any of your friends down, by all means, and leave the household arrangements to Kirk."

Geoffrey was not particularly delighted at having to 'keep house' with Mr. Tom Kirk. But he thought it wiser to acquiesce, as, at any rate, he had gained his chief point. "Have you any objection to my running up to town for a day?" asked he; "I must try on things, and I want to look up some of my old Eton pals."

"By all means go, Geoffrey, whenever you please. And I will leave you a little cheque in addition to your allowance, as of course you will be put to many small expenses while I am away. Now I have letters to write, so go and finish your pipe."

"He's not such a brute after all!" thought Geoffrey, as he left the room. "It's very decent of the old chap to fork out the rhino; I wonder what he is going to stump up. Of course it's his duty to treat me handsomely, but he might keep me short if he liked."

An unexpected obstacle prevented Colonel Neville's admirable

arrangements being carried out in their entirety. Mr. Kirk resolutely refused to stop at Templeton Manor during his friend's absence.

"No," he said. "If you will have me, I will go with you. But if you won't have me, I shall go down to Brighton for a bit. A blow of sea air will do me good. My appetite has not been quite up to the mark lately."

"My dear Tom," remarked the Colonel, "there is no cook at Castle Clare, and Crosby's *chef* would scarcely be up to your ideas."

"Then I will cook myself," replied Mr. Kirk. "Do you think mine is all theory? Not at all. I should be ashamed to abuse a cook unless I could tell him how to do it better."

"But," objected the Colonel, "you will find it as dull as ditch-water."

"Bless you, I know the country well," said Mr. Kirk. "It's a place where every fellow asks you into his house, and offers you whiskey. You generally find the skeleton of a cow, or a dead dog on the tennis ground in the back garden."

"Nonsense," said the Colonel.

"Yes, but you do. Once a man told me to stoop when I came through the front door. There was a pig hanging over it: one they had just killed, and the blood dropped on my collar; the porch was the handiest place to hang it up, I suppose. There's a very good fellow near Castle Clare—quite a country swell, with a big place and lots of servants. He made me have a nip with him, as they all do, and he looked for a corkscrew in the side-board. I saw two of Ely's cartridges on a dessert plate with some lovely American apples: they don't think anything of that. And it is not really of the slightest consequence."

"I suppose not," remarked the Colonel.

"Not a bit. As to cookery, they are certainly rather behind-hand. The national stew is about the only real good thing you get in the country, bar snipe and woodcock. A thousand pities that the season is over. However, if you want to go alone, there's an end on't."

Of course the Colonel did not want to go alone. Tom Kirk had a vague idea that things were very bad in County Carbery, and that his old friend was in some danger. That was enough to make him determined to accompany the Colonel. Besides, he entertained the strongest objection to remaining in the house to look after 'the cub,' as he termed Geoffrey when talking to himself. So it was finally decided that the two elder men should start together, and Geoffrey rejoiced greatly at the prospect of liberty. He stood in the porch to see them off.

"All that luggage, Tom?" asked the Colonel, looking aghast at the many formidable packages accumulated in the hall. "Why I have only a portmanteau and a bag; surely that's enough."

"You forget my *batterie de cuisine*, and my hunting things," said Mr. Kirk. "That box contains top boots. In the deal case under it there are a couple of copper saucepans, a grid, and a *réchaud*. A fellow can't get on without a *réchaud*, you know."

"Can he not?" inquired Neville. "I am not sure that I know what a *réchaud* is."

"Oh yes, you do, only you forget just now. I'll show it you when we get over. Then there are some wooden spoons and a hair sieve for *purées*, and a few odds and ends in that other box, and a *bain marie* as well. Nothing is more absolutely indispensable than a *bain marie*, except a salamander."

"Have you a salamander with you?" inquired Geoffrey, curiously. "A real live salamander? What is the use of him?"

"Oh! sweet ignorance!" exclaimed Mr. Kirk. "Ingenuous youth! Where would the lovely golden brown come from which you so much admire on Monsieur François' sweetbreads, if it were not for the salamander?"

"Well, get loaded up," said the Colonel, "or we shall be late for the train. Never mind the salamander."

Bain marie, salamander, *réchaud*, and other articles were sent off in the break, and soon the dog-cart came round for the two friends.

"Go up to town to-morrow, then, Geoffrey; and bring any friends you like back with you. You may ride Patrick if you like, or put any decent chap on him, but leave the grey to be exercised till I come back," said the Colonel.

"Thank you, sir."

"I have sent a note to Mrs. Germaine," continued the Colonel, "and have asked her to take pity on your forlorn condition, when you are alone. Go there as often as you like. They are delightful people. And here is that letter for you. Good-bye. God bless you, my boy. If there's anything wrong with you, send for Charges at once."

"Yes, sir," answered Geoffrey, "and thank you. Good-bye."

When they had turned down the avenue, the youth opened the envelope which his guardian had placed in his hand. It contained a cheque for a hundred pounds. So Geoffrey was now entirely happy. He had the run of a big house, horses to ride and drive, a cellar full of good wine, permission to invite his boon companions, entire liberty, and plenty of money.

He did not look particularly grieved when he lighted his pipe and returned to the house, and the first use he made of his newly-acquired freedom was to smoke in the dining room, where there was an armchair which exactly suited the curve of his back.

Before he had read half the "Sporting Times," a note was brought in to him. It was from Mrs. Germaine, inviting him to dine quietly with them on that evening, as he would be entirely alone.

"Bother!" exclaimed he, "fancy sitting down to dine with that prosy old chap, and drinking his beastly wine when can help it. Not for Joseph." Geoffrey hated writing, but was obliged to reply to the note, which he did as follows:—

"DEAR MRS. GERMAINE,

"I am sorry to say I am going to town or would accept your kind invite. Yrs. truly, GEOFFREY CLARE."

He was not quite sure of his spelling, but looking through this note very carefully, he could not detect any mistake. The *x* before the *c* did not at first appear quite right, but he remembered *except*, and finally sent off his letter. Then he at once rang for Pewter.

"Pewter," he said, when the 'vally' entered the room, "there's another train to town to-night, isn't there?"

"To be sure, sir. You could go up by the six, only I'd have to be very sharp about the packing. It's nearly four o'clock now."

"Then *be* sharp, Pewter. Has the dog-cart come back from Bancaster yet?"

"No, sir, I believe not, but the brougham is in."

"Tell them to put something or other in the brougham, and come round at five, then. We'll go up to town."

"What things will you please to want, sir?" asked Pewter, highly delighted.

"Oh, enough for a week, dress clothes and that sort of thing, you know."

"Very well, sir."

CHAPTER XV.

A SOCIAL EVENING.

Geoffrey was not long alone in London. Templar and Weevil turned up at his hotel next morning, and in the course of the day he discovered a couple of old schoolfellows, who were his especial favourites, and who possessed certain very decided advantages over the two adventurers. They were younger, and they looked like gentlemen, which certainly Weevil did not. Mellis was supposed to be reading for the Bar, while George White was simply a young man about town, getting into debt as far as his tradesmen would let him, and spending the small monthly allowance he drew from his father as soon as he received it. As Geoffrey was not yet of age he could not gain admittance into any of the better clubs, but the Royal Albert was a hospitable institution, and he was proposed, seconded, and elected before five o'clock on the day following his arrival in town. It was no more than natural that he should celebrate his election by a dinner that very evening, and his four friends were quite willing to accept a short invitation. Captain Templar was good enough to save him the trouble of ordering both dinner and wine, and he was not unwilling to defer to his mentor's judgment. But when this important matter had been attended to, and the best that money could procure had been bespoken, Geoffrey hinted to his gallant friend that he had some private business of his own.

"Which way are you going?" asked Templar, indiscreetly.

"Well, I do not exactly know," replied Geoffrey.

"Not know, if you have business there?"

"N—no, not exactly," answered the lad; "the fact is, it's very private."

"Private? Now, old chap, don't be playing me false. Don't go borrowing money, or something of that sort, while I am under old Flatman's knife! It wouldn't be fair, you know."

"Oh, it's nothing of that sort, Templar: you need not be afraid. I have plenty of money; the governor has stumped up handsomely."

"The deuce he has!" exclaimed Templar, wondering how much ready money the lad had in his pocket, and very willing to get it if he saw a chance. "Then what are you up to, old man?"

"Never mind," answered Geoffrey; "you just let me look after my own business."

"You're a sly dog, Geoff., considering what a youngster you are. You're a bad lot, I'm afraid." And he punched his friend facetiously in the ribs. Strange to say, this was very flattering to Geoffrey, who was not unwilling to be considered a *roué* even before he had cut his wisdom teeth. Bidding Templar not be late, he jumped into a hansom, and in twenty minutes was ringing at Mrs. Flatman's door, and inquiring timidly whether she were at home.

A peep from behind the dining-room curtains had told that lady who her visitor was, wherefore she was graciously pleased to be at home, and to receive him with the warmest welcome. He dropped into a delightful easy chair in Mrs. Flatman's boudoir, and at once had occasion to think that she looked quite as pretty in morning dress, or rather, in a *negligé* gown, as in evening costume. He was a little shy at first, but Mrs. Flatman's condescending kindness soon put him entirely at his ease.

"Governor's off to Ireland," said he, after a small "nip" of something, "and I've come up for a bit of a spree."

"Quite right, Mr. Clare," answered the lady. "It must be very dull down at the Hall with only two old gentlemen in the house."

"Beastly," replied Geoffrey; "I'm sick of hunting, too. They talk and think of nothing but hunting down there."

"And you want a little ladies' society for a change?"

"Well, the fact is, you know, I'm not particularly fond of ladies' society, as a rule," said Geoffrey.

"That's not very complimentary to me."

"As a rule, I said. *You* are quite different. I'm talking of those starched people in Bankshire, stiff as pokers, don't know what B. & S. means, go to church three times on Sundays, and that sort of thing, you know."

"Very slow, in fact," remarked Mrs. Flatman.

"Damnable. Now with *you* it's quite different. I'm as jolly as a sandboy and happy as a king when I'm here."

"It's very good of you to say so."

"Good? not a bit of it. I mean it, you know. You're awfully jolly, you know," and Geoffrey added with a blush, venturing on a bold compliment, "you're devilish pretty, too."

When he had said it, he felt much frightened. Perhaps Mrs. Flatman would be offended and turn him out of the house. But she did not seem at all angry. She only said:—

"Now, Mr. Clare, you are making fun of me. Is it likely that you would see anything attractive in me, when you know such a lot of great ladies down in the country?"

"Not a patch on you, Mrs. Flatman, upon my word," exclaimed the youth, highly pleased at the success of his first clumsy attempt at love making. "It's chalk and cheese, you know."

"You don't mean it," said Mrs. Flatman, simpering a little.

"But I do, blowed if I don't. You're a real brick, and no mistake; and as to looks and dress, there is no one who can hold a candle to you."

"I only wish it were true," sighed the lady.

"Well, *I* think so, and I'd like to find the fellow that would contradict me," exclaimed Geoffrey. "I would rather be with you than at the club, I really would."

"That is a great compliment, Mr. Clare."

"Well, it is, because the club is comfortable, and a fellow has not got to mind his p's and q's so terribly. But still I'd rather be here. I wish," he continued sentimentally, "that I could be here oftener."

"Come as often as you like, I shall be very glad to see you," replied Mrs. Flatman.

"No, really? Will you really be glad to see me?" asked Geoffrey.

"Of course I shall; why not?"

"Well, you know, I didn't think you'd *really* care at all. Of course you're very kind and nice and all that, but I could not expect you really to care about a fellow like *me*, you know."

"Perhaps I might, some day," said Mrs. Flatman, in a low voice, mustering a blush.

"You don't say so," exclaimed Geoffrey, rapturously seizing the lady's hand and imprinting a kiss on it.

"Don't! what would my husband say?" replied she, trying, but not very hard, to withdraw her hand.

"You won't tell him, so how should he know?"

"You want me to have secrets from my husband?" asked Mrs. Flatman, archly; "that is scarcely fair."

"Oh, all ladies have their little secrets. You need not tell Flatman that I think you the prettiest and best dressed woman in London, need you?"

"No, I suppose not."

And so the conversation proceeded sociably, and rapidly developed into a very pronounced flirtation, in which the lady made most of the advances, while appearing to be very modest and retiring. Any woman of thirty can always make a young man of twenty believe anything she likes, and Mrs. Flatman was no ordinary woman, but an accomplished coquette in her own sphere. She wished to attract Geoffrey, and to make him subservient to her will. The task was not a difficult one.

"Now," she said, after his visit had lasted over an hour, and cleverly concealing a yawn, "you really must go. My husband might come home at any moment, and I should not like him to find you here."

"All right. When may I come again? To-morrow?"

"To-morrow would hardly be quite proper."

"But I must see you to-morrow, somehow," exclaimed Geoffrey, with all the impatience of a boyish lover.

"Silly boy," she said, playfully tapping his cheek, "surely you can wait a few days."

"No, I can't. Besides, I shall have to go back to Templeton soon."

"Wait a minute, then, you foolish lad," she replied, placing a chaste kiss on his forehead. "I have to go out to do some shopping to-morrow. Will you meet me somewhere and drive me about?"

"Of course I will," cried Geoffrey enthusiastically.

"Then meet me at Swan and Edgar's, Piccadilly side, at three o'clock," she answered. "I will finish that business before you arrive. I know men hate these big shops. Then you can go with me to the jewellers, and help me to choose some little things I want. Now go."

She let Geoffrey kiss her cheek when he said good-bye, and the youth walked down the street with all the air of a conqueror. The dinner at the club was very lively. Mellis and White got on very well with Captain Templar, although they did not quite chum with Mr. Weevil. That gentleman, however, proved more entertaining than his appearance led them to expect. He told many 'good' stories, which will not bear repetition, and had little bits of gossip to relate of various members of the aristocracy with whom pecuniary transactions had brought him into contact. But he was careful not to say how he became acquainted with Lord So-and-so or the Marquis of That. He did not get drunk, though he took quite enough wine; Templar however was remarkably abstemious. Not so the three younger members of the party, on whom Pommery 74, preceded by sherry, and followed by Madeira and claret, had produced a very decided effect before the dinner was over.

"You know the ropes here, Templar," said Geoffrey; "where shall we have our smoke?"

"Oh, in the billiard-room," replied that worthy; "it's more amusing than the smoking-room. Besides, perhaps you or your friends would like a game by-and-by."

"By all means," said Geoffrey, who was very fond of billiards, and prided himself on his play. "Come on."

"Not a bad shop, this," remarked Mellis, settling himself on a comfortable seat. "Can strangers play here?"

"Of course," replied Templar; "we are not beastly inhos-

pitable like the Carlton or the Conservative. Any gentleman may play if he has dined here."

While they were discussing coffee and cigars, Mr. Joyce, the owner of the mustard cat, appeared and inquired how Geoffrey liked Kildare.

"He's a good horse," replied the youth; "I can't grumble over the bargain."

"I should think not. I'm almost sorry I sold him now. I might have got sixty for him a few days later. But it's of no use quarrelling over spilt milk. Carried you well, did he?"

"Fairly, on the whole. But he tumbled into a big ditch, and had to be dug out. It was a beastly place, but he ought to have got over it; the other horses did," said Geoffrey.

"Want of condition, perhaps," remarked Mellis.

"No, no," said Mr. Joyce, "Kildare was as hard as nails when I sold him."

"Want of riding," suggested Mr. White, at which Geoffrey flushed angrily.

"More likely to be that," assented Joyce, but Templar pinched his arm, and he added: "It wants a lot of practice to get over that Bankshire country, Mr. Clare. The oldest of them come to grief sometimes. They say it's the most difficult country in England."

"I should think it was, almost," assented Geoffrey, regaining his temper.

"What do you say to a game of billiards, Geoff.?" asked Templar.

"Delighted," he replied, but asked out of civility whether Mellis or White would like to play. The former declared he could not, while the latter said he preferred looking on. In fact Mr. White could hardly stand, and he knew that if he tried to hold a cue he would probably tumble down. So he wisely subsided into a distant armchair, sucking his cigar, which went out very soon, because the smoker dropped off to sleep.

"You are too good for me, Templar," said Geoffrey; "you must give me points."

"Certainly. Twenty in a hundred, and play you for a crown."

"Well, I am not sure that you can give me twenty. But we'll see. You're on."

Geoffrey started wonderfully well, while Templar was not successful. The young man not only fluked, but also made what he played for. He rattled the balls about vigorously, having had just enough wine to make him lively and jovial, but not yet enough to shake him. Soon the game was called—seventy-three to thirty-eight.

"You're not quite in your usual form," said he to Templar.

"No. I've had too much champagne, I suspect: and you're fluking like the devil. I can give you twenty as a rule, I know."

"I'm sure he can," observed Mr. Joyce.

"Well, I'll back myself for a sovereign," said Geoffrey.

"Not evens, Mr. Clare, not likely," replied that gentleman. "I'll take you three to one."

"Three to one be blowed! I'll lay you two pounds to one."

"You're on," said Mr. Joyce.

In a few minutes more, Geoffrey fluked in off the red, and left it near the middle pocket. Two easy hazards brought him up to 96. Templar could make only ten more, when the game was called—101 to 54. Mr. Joyce threw a sovereign on the table.

"Oh!" exclaimed Geoffrey, "double or quits, if you like. Double or quits, Templar?"

"Yes," said that gentleman; "but I can't give you twenty."

"I'll back myself at ten, and bet you another sovereign," said Geoffrey, ordering a brandy and soda.

To this the other agreed, and the game proceeded. Templar was less unlucky, but still Geoffrey kept his lead till more than half the game was over. By this time both he and Mr. Joyce had become much excited. "Lay me five sovereigns to three," said Mr. Joyce.

"I'll make it a tenner, Mr. Joyce, if you like," said Geoffrey. "That tenner you got out of me over the beastly cat, you know."

"Well, I ought to have odds, but I'll take you," answered Joyce, "just to give you a chance."

"Have another sov. on, Templar?" asked Geoffrey.

"I should be robbing you, Geoff. I won't. I can give you more than ten points," replied the good, faithful friend.

"Nonsense. It's a fair game at ten. I'm not afraid."

"I would rather not."

"Very well, then, have it your own way," said the youth. "What's the game, marker?" he asked, as he raised his cue.

"71, 60, sir."

"Just my points, and one over."

The game proceeded without any startling incident till near the end. Then Geoffrey broke down at a hazard which required more steadiness than the last brandy and soda had left him. There was an easy stroke for Templar, who was eighty-one to his ninety-three. "I'll take two to one in tenners, Mr. Clare," said Joyce.

"Don't bet," whispered Templar, "I've got a break."

"Hold your tongue," answered Geoffrey, crossly, "I know what I'm about; you are on, Mr. Joyce."

"Right you are, that makes thirty pounds to twenty."

Captain Templar made five losing hazards off the red in succession, then a canon, and ran out a winner by holing the red.

"I told you I could beat you at ten, Geoff.," he said, quietly. "Don't back yourself again."

"Give me a chance of getting my money back from Joyce!" exclaimed Geoffrey. "Give me twenty. Double or quits, Mr. Joyce."

Templar consented with much apparent reluctance, and only after some pressing from Joyce, who bet Geoffrey an even pony. Mr. Mellis became much interested, and backed his schoolfellow for a modest sovereign, all he said he could afford. Another peg had, however, the effect of making Geoffrey play very wildly, and more than once he missed the balls altogether. His temper grew worse. When his score was sixty-five to Captain Templar's fifty, he offered to bet twenty pounds more.

"Upon my word, Geoff., you are making an ass of yourself," whispered Templar to him. "If I could do it, I would lose on purpose. But I cannot, in honour, you know, as Joyce has a pile on."

"Play your d——d best," was Geoffrey's reply, "and hold your jaw."

For a few strokes it looked as if the bets were doubtful. Geoffrey ran up to seventy-seven by luck and a few flukes. Then Templar got in, playing very quietly and steadily, and won the game with ease by nineteen. Geoffrey handed eighty pounds to Mr. Joyce, and put his cue up. Mr. White was roused out of his chair, and the three young men left the club with very uncertain steps. Captain Templar said he would go with them, as they were scarcely fit to take care of themselves. But, before leaving, he found that he had forgotten his cigar-case in the billiard-room. Running up to fetch it, he came upon Mr. Joyce, whom he drew out to the landing, rather against that gentleman's will. "Hand over, sharp!" said Captain Templar.

"Well, you need not be in such a devil of a hurry," answered Joyce; "to-morrow would do just as well."

"Not for me," replied the Captain; "now, look alive!"

"You might have lost, you know," remarked Joyce, fumbling with the bank notes.

"Lost? I? Is it likely? Now, no humbug, please, or you'll be blown upon."

"Well, anyhow, you ought to be satisfied with a pony," said Mr. Joyce, offering Templar twenty-five pounds.

"Not a penny less than forty, and if you're not sharp, I know what I have to do," replied the gallant officer, placing a heavy hand on Mr. Joyce's shoulder, and his face assuming a look which would have frightened Geoffrey's young friends out of their wits.

"You need not bully a man so," rejoined Joyce. "There's the money."

"Right—and mind, Joyce, if you don't run straight, it will be the worse for you."

When Captain Templar reached the hall the young men had gone. Geoffrey had said, "Let's give him the slip. He's a good chap, you know, but he's an awful bore with his preaching. Come on to the 'Imperial.'"

Messrs. Mellis and White were nothing loth, and soon reached

"Now, no humbug, please!"

that resort, which is popular rather than fashionable. Over more liquor they applauded to the echo the performance, and when it drew to its close, Geoffrey scouted the idea of going home, for he was still smarting under his loss of eighty pounds, and followed the not unusual custom drowning his sorrows in the flowing bowl. Rather unsteadily the three friends swaggered out, and crowding into a hansom, drove to one of those attractive drinking bars, called restaurants, in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly Circus. Here Mr. Mellis and Mr. White at once devoted themselves to two of the smart young ladies who were supposed to attend to the bar. Geoffrey, still sulky, and rapidly approaching drunkenness, attempted in vain to get a word from the fair Hebes, who were old friends of the two Etonians. Over another brandy and soda he relapsed into sulky silence, when the attention of all was directed to a wrangle in a distant corner.

"Go out!" said a coarse voice, "we won't have no row here."

There were female voices pitched in high tones of dispute, and sundry uncomplimentary epithets were exchanged between two very smartly-dressed women, real ladies, no doubt.

"You shan't interfere with the women!" exclaimed a half-tipsy man, in an angry tone.

"Hout you go, I say," repeated the first speaker, "I'll call the bobbies if yer don't."

"Call 'em and be d—d to you," said one of the party. "It's only a difference of opinion between the ladies, it's no business of yours."

"Hurrah, here's a row," shouted White, pleased as Punch. "Come along, Mellis; come along, Clare; let's see the fun."

The three young men forced their way to that part of the room, which was now attracting a crowd from all sides.

"Now, mum, jist you move on," said the professional chucker-out, roughly pushing one of the women towards the door, through which a couple of policemen entered at the same moment.

"Leave the lady alone, or I'll knock you down," exclaimed one of her escort.

"I'd like to see you do it," replied the man with a grin. "Now, get on there, sharp, will yer?" This last with a fresh shove.

A spring forward, a sharp blow on the back of the head, and the chucker-out was staggering against the bystanders. In a moment the row was tremendous. The police pushed their way through, saying, "Go out, all of you," and tried to seize the valiant defender of the fair sex. Geoffrey's ire was aroused.

"What brutes! Let's pitch into them!" he cried, hitting the first policeman under the chin. "It is not fair."

Mellis and White at once imitated his example, and joined the ranks of the party which was about to be chucked. The scrimmage became general. The men employed in the establishment came to the rescue of their comrade and of the police, while the more intoxicated of the male visitors sided with Geoffrey's friends, and those who were still sober got away as fast as they could. Geoffrey was seized by the collar, which was torn off his neck, while he hit out wildly at an innocent man in front of him. He was hustled, kicked, and shoved, and at last found himself outside in a drizzling rain, being walked off between two stalwart policemen.

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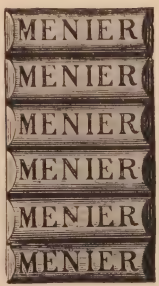

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CHAPTER XVI.

THE BEAK.

THE short walk to Vine Street and half an hour in the cell had partly sobered Geoffrey, and half-a-crown procured a messenger to the Albert Club. But neither Templar nor Weevil were on the premises. It was now far too late to hope for bail from anywhere, and his name and address having been taken down (and he was just sober enough to adopt an *alias* on the spur of the moment), he was pushed into a very stuffy, dirty chamber to chew the cud of his reflections, in company with a tipsy cabman, a medical student in a high state of elation, who insisted on singing snatches of Vance's songs all out of tune, and a professional beggar. Towards one o'clock in the morning he suddenly bethought himself of the faithful Pewter. He would send to the hotel for him. He yelled and kicked at the door till a rough voice called out:

"Hold yer d—d row, or I'll put the bracelets on."

But at last his appeals were listened to, and mindful of the official search, which had shown Geoffrey to be in possession of a very fair sum of money, a policeman consented to go to the hotel.

It was long, very long, before he returned, and a deep feeling of disgust and nausea had seized on our hero. The cabman had dropped off into a drunken sleep, the medical student had become friendly and painfully familiar, calling Geoffrey 'old pal' and 'dear chappie,' while the professional beggar was dressing some horrible, mostly artificial sores, by the display of which he aroused the pity of the tender-hearted passers-by. At last the friendly policeman opened the door, and beckoned Geoffrey out into the narrow, grimy room, where the night Inspector stood behind his desk.

"'Ere *is* a go!" exclaimed Pewter, touching his forelock. 'Well, sir, what hever brought you here?"

"Do you know this person?" asked the Inspector, sternly.

"Reyther!" replied Pewter. "He's my guv'nor. I'm his

vally." Then he proceeded glibly, not noticing Geoffrey's winks and signals, which were certainly not easily visible in the semi-darkness, "He's Squire Clare, of Castle Clare, County Carberry, and of Templeton Manor, Bankshire."

"Is that your name, sir?" the Inspector inquired of Geoffrey.

The young man hung his head, and did not answer.

"Why did you call yourself John Smith, of Norwich?" asked the officer.

"Oh! I've been and gone and done it," muttered the repentant Pewter, putting his fingers into his mouth.

"It does not matter," said the Inspector. "It wasn't much use, any how, because we've got your pocket-book with your visiting cards."

A few questions followed, but as assaulting the police in the execution of their duty was a serious offence, and Pewter's bail was naturally declined, there seemed no chance of Geoffrey's getting out of the police-station till next day. The "vally," however, proved invaluable. He slyly suggested to the Inspector, that as his governor had over thirty pounds in his pocket when arrested, the officers might be sure of handsome tips if they let him go back to his hotel to bed: the bank notes in their hands were better than any bail. This view at last prevailed. Geoffrey undertook to appear at eleven next morning, and left the place under the care of Pewter, who put him to bed with many consoling words.

"You ain't the first, sir, not by no means, as has got into a row with the perlice. Lord Ronald, bless yer, was always having a tit-up with 'em. He used to knock over a bobby just for a spree now and then. Don't you be put out about it, but just go to sleep quiet."

It was only when he woke up in the morning with a violent headache and a parched throat that Geoffrey thought of his two companions in the fight. But there was now no time to inquire. Pewter came in with a tray, bringing "A hair of the dog that bit you, sir;" and, after a slight stimulant, Geoffrey felt just able to tub and dress, with his man's assistance. A ghastly sight to him was the squalid crowd at the police court.

Traces of intemperance, greed, malice, and all the worst passions of humanity were visible in every one of the wretched faces in that hideous assemblage. As usual, the night charges were the first to be disposed of, and Geoffrey had not to wait long for his turn. He assumed a jaunty, devil-may-care air when he was placed in the dock, and, thinking it manly, attempted to carry off matters with a high hand. He had heard a number of five-shilling fines inflicted, and therefore rapidly regained courage. Such a petty affair as this would surely not be mentioned in the papers; so, after all, it was of very little consequence.

"Geoffrey Clare, of Castle Clare," shouted the clerk, "drunk and disorderly, and assaulting the police in the execution of their duty. Constable Flynn, X brigade."

The oath was gabbled through, Constable Flynn kissed the book he had kissed a thousand times before, and swore that the prisoner committed an aggravated and unprovoked assault on him by hitting him under the chin when he was attempting to remove an intoxicated person from the Imperial Restaurant. Another constable corroborated this evidence, and no other witness appeared.

"What have you to say to the charge?" asked the magistrate.

"I was a bit tight, sir; that was all. I had been dining with some friends."

"It's a bad case; for, in your position, you ought to know better. Five pounds, or two months' imprisonment."

Even in his humiliating position, Geoffrey's desperate conceit made him try a bit of silly bravado. The policeman touched his shoulder, signalling him to step out of the dock, and he obeyed, but turned round at the last moment and called out:

"Toss you whether its a tenner or nothing, your worship."

"Here," said the magistrate. "Bring the prisoner back. What did he say just now? I did not quite catch it."

"He offered to toss your worship whether it was ten pounds or nothing," replied the clerk.

"Mr. Clare," said the magistrate, sternly, "I am very much inclined to commit you to prison without the alternative of a fine, for your contempt of court. Put the prisoner back, I will decide on his case by-and-bye."

"Well, you're a good plucked 'un, sir," whispered Pewter, as he passed, "but you should have held your tongue. It ain't no use quarrelling with beaks."

For three mortal hours Geoffrey had to kick his heels in the lock-up, to repent his insane folly. It was past two o'clock when he was at last brought up again, and at three he was to meet Mrs. Flatman. Fortunately Swan and Edgar's is very near Vine Street; but to come direct from the police-station to the presence of his lady-love! what a horrible idea! He was subdued enough when he was once more shouldered into that fatal dock. The friendly policeman, who had fetched Pewter the night before, and whom the latter worthy had not only treated to a capital lunch in the interval, but also persuaded to help his unfortunate master by a liberal largesse (for Pewter always had a little money, and knew when to spend it to advantage), whispered to Geoffrey quickly, "Ax his pardin, sir; it'll be all right then."

"Prisoner," said the magistrate, "what have you to say in your defence? You have committed a very gross contempt of court, and you are liable to a term of imprisonment till you have purged it."

"I humbly beg your pardon, your worship," Geoffrey contrived to say, though the words came out with difficulty.

The magistrate thought this a fit occasion to preach one of his favourite sermons against drunkenness and vice generally: though the text was old and the sermon was trite, he contrived to make Geoffrey wince, and cause a hot blush to spread over his face more than once. He wound up by saying, that in view of the prisoner's extreme youth and inexperience he would only inflict an additional fine of five pounds, and hoped that this would be a warning to him to avoid intoxicating liquors, and to entertain a proper respect for the courts, during his whole life.

There was not very much left of Colonel Neville's cheque for a hundred when Geoffrey left the police-station. He was just in time, but only just, at Swan and Edgar's. Mrs. Flatman at once saw that there was something wrong, and the clever woman suggested that they should have some luncheon and a talk. In

a private room she was not long in extracting an almost full confession from Geoffrey, in which, however, he was careful to palliate his conduct as much as he could. He did not feel like lunch, but his fair enchantress insisted on his taking a slight 'pick-me-up,' and consoled him as best she could.

"You won't care for me a bit now I've made such an ass of myself," moaned Geoffrey.

"Never mind, you silly boy," she replied, patting his cheek. "Other fellows have done worse. Don't be so dull about it. You were very brave to pitch into the police like that!"

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course I do; and I like you all the better because you stood up for the poor women. You are a brave boy, Geoffrey!"

Gradually the youth began to feel on better terms with himself, and to think that, after all, it was not such a disgraceful transaction. Emmeline Flatman's sweet words went far to efface the effect of the magistrate's sermon. When the lunch had been discussed (by Mrs. Flatman) and paid for (by Geoffrey), the former said that she must attend to her shopping. Her admirer felt so grateful to her for her kindness and gentle attentions, that when they reached the jeweller's he determined to offer her a present—if only she would accept it. He certainly could not pay any large sum in cash, but his card was a sufficient reference (after the jeweller had slyly sent round a confidential man to the hotel to ascertain whether it was all right). There was much demur on Mrs. Flatman's part, but at last she consented to accept a pair of handsome diamond earrings, for which Mr. Clare, of Castle Clare, was debited with nearly a hundred pounds. The lady felt that she ought to do something in return.

"Come up and dine with me," she said, when they left the shop. "I shall be alone to-night, as Mr. Flatman is dining in the City somewhere. Only you must go away early."

Of course the invitation was eagerly accepted, and after Geoffrey had put the lady into a cab he returned to the hotel to dress in a very amiable frame of mind.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONSOLATION.

IT WAS a very pleasant little dinner, pleasant at any rate to Geoffrey. His fur was gently stroked the right way. A sagacious housewife had foreseen that his appetite would not be equal to anything very substantial, and the few dishes which appeared were highly spiced and tempting. He could not, like Tom Kirk, analyse the component parts of each delicate morsel, nor did he even know its name. But the result was eminently satisfactory. He was not only allowed but encouraged to make himself entirely comfortable, and to put off what he called his 'company manners,' when the neat-handed maid had finally retired and left the two to coffee and cigarettes. Mrs. Flatman then became a little changeful in her humour, alternately coquettish and sentimental; she wove round the inexperienced lad a slender but strong net in which he was soon fairly entangled. She repulsed him when he was tempted to become unduly loving; but she did so with chaff and pleasantry which took

away all harshness. Then she would gradually lead him on by gentle encouragement, till he was once more induced to brave her anger and neglect the warnings of her little fore-finger, though raised ever so threateningly. Now she would affect to disbelieve his ardent professions of admiration, and call them the flattering but false speeches of an accomplished man of the world—a suggestion which Geoffrey denied emphatically, but which made him swell with pride till his shirt front resembled the breast of a pigeon. Again, she would become serious and sad, and, for a while, affect the airs of the *femme incomprise*, hinting that there was no sympathy between her husband and herself, and that she would gladly listen and believe if she only dared. Towards ten o'clock she told her guest that he must go, and Geoffrey consented, not unwillingly, for although he was very happy and comfortable in the cosy boudoir, he had occasional visions of the sudden appearance of a husband who might object to another gentleman spending a long evening with his wife, however innocent the *tête-à-tête* might be.

"Heigho!" said Geoffrey, rising to take leave. "I shall soon have to go back to that beastly place. I wonder whether I could get Templar and one or two other fellows to come down for a bit, while the old man is away?"

"Oh, you can easily get men to go to a place like Templeton Manor; they would be too delighted. But don't make it too cheap, Geoffrey, if you would not mind my giving you a bit of advice. I'm older than you, you know," she added, with a little smile and an arch glance.

"Men are all very well," said Geoffrey, seizing her hand; "but it will be hard lines to leave you, and perhaps not to have a chance of seeing you for ever so long."

"Why don't you ask me on a visit?" said Mrs. Flatman, suddenly.

"You! would you come?"

"Why not? I should like it, awfully. Perhaps it might be arranged."

"Oh, what a splendid idea!" exclaimed Geoffrey. "What

times we should have! But would you have to bring Mr. Flatman?"

"We certainly don't want *him*," replied Emmeline, smiling; "but I'm afraid it would be very difficult to get away. It is a lovely idea, but I fear it will not do. It is a pity. But I will think it over. You would not mind my coming with a lady friend, would you?"

"Come with as many lady friends as you like, only come, dearest Emmeline," cried Geoffrey, enthusiastically pressing a kiss on her soft cheek before she had time to turn away.

"Naughty boy! Well, I will see about it. Now go, go at once."

Geoffrey at last departed. He was, however, too physically tired and mentally too much elated to join his friends at the Royal Albert. He felt the desire which, as Goethe says, is common to all lovers, of communing with himself, and he was terribly sleepy as well. So, for that evening, Messrs. Templar, Weevil, and Joyce awaited him in vain.

The next day, however, the two first-named gentlemen looked him up at an early hour (for them). They were far too fond of him not to be very anxious about his health.

"We ought to bring that off, sharp," said Templar to Weevil, as they turned into Bond Street, after ascertaining that Geoffrey had already gone out.

"Do you think it is not too soon?" asked Weevil, doubtfully.

"Not a bit; the young one is going a great pace already. You may be sure that he's spending no end of money on our fair friend" ——

"Mrs. E.?"——

"Ay, the very one. He has not much more ready cash with him, and from what I can find out about the Colonel, he's not likely to get much. As sure as eggs is eggs, Neville will pull him up short in a very few days. You see every paper has got that stupid police story."

"True," assented Weevil; "but I don't see what difference that makes."

"Weevil," remarked the gallant Captain, "you are drinking yourself silly. Do you suppose that the Colonel does not get the London papers out in Ireland? or, if he doesn't get them, that some kind friend won't send him one?"

"I suppose so," said Weevil.

"Well, of course, as soon as he sees the police report, he'll think his precious ward is going to the deuce, and he won't be far wrong. Then he'll pounce upon the youngster and send him away somewhere—to Australia or Canada, or some other outlandish place, and we shall be done out of our money."

"He's pretty hard, then, the old chap?"

"I don't exactly know," answered Templar. "He seems to have been soft enough so far, and as innocent as a sucking dove. But from what I hear, I don't think he is a chap to stand much nonsense. Now, what we've got to do is to draw the biggest figure we can, and then take a little journey abroad for the benefit of our health. You want it badly, old chap. If you don't pull up B. and S. will finish you."

"No fear," said Weevil, wincing. "Well, how is it to be done?"

The two turned into one of the small alleys between Piccadilly and Jermyn Street to consult, while Geoffrey selected an assortment of various articles at Howell and James', which he had gathered from the previous evening's conversation would not be unwelcome to Mrs. Flatman. That lady was good enough to lunch with him at the Café Royal, and then to accept his escort to a fashionable lady's tailor, where she gave orders for a riding habit, a morning dress, and a few other garments, coyly silent when Geoffrey handed the man his own card and address as the future paymaster. But she pressed his arm when they emerged from the shop, and whispered: "You are awfully good to me, darling." That whisper repaid him with interest for having pledged his credit for a very considerable sum.

Among certain young men sherry-and-bitters time is as well-known as tea time among ladies. At this witching hour, Templar and Weevil at last found their young friend at the Royal Albert.

Their joy was extreme, and though Geoffrey affected to be discreet, he allowed them to guess that the attractions of a lady were the cause of his absence the previous evening. To-day, however, he was disengaged, and agreed to dine early and go to the play.

When the evening was fairly advanced, when many brandies and sodas had been drunk, stories told, and sundry games of écarté played, in which Geoffrey had lost a few pounds—nothing worth speaking of as an amount, but important in the present depressed condition of his finances—Templar, who had been having an animated discussion with Weevil in a distant part of the room, approached our hero, and said:

"Geoff., will you just come over here for a minute, and settle a bet?"

"All right," replied the young man, staggering to his legs. "Whatsh matter, old fellah?"

Templar and Weevil were at the writing table, with a number of slips of paper before them. These all bore scrawls of a similar, though not of identical import. On one was written "Cary Nevil," on another "Carey Nevill," a third bore the words "Cary Nevvil," and so on.

"Templar bet me a sovereign that I can't get so near your governor's name as he can," said Weevil. "You are to decide the bet, please."

"You're all wrong," laughed Geoffrey, smiling a drunken smile. "Itsh Carey Neville."

"Yes, I know that," said Templar. "It's this way, is it not?"

And he took up another slip of paper and wrote: "Carey Nevvill, late Colonel 170th Regt."

"No, it ishn't," answered Geoffrey. "You can't write, old man. You're drunsh."

"I've won!" exclaimed Weevil. "Hand over the counter."

"No," replied Templar, "write it yourself, and see if you can do it any better."

Weevil proceeded to write, "Cary Nevil, Colonel late 170th Regiment."

"Thatsh just ash bad," hiccupped Geoffrey.

"Show us, then," exclaimed Templar, "just to settle the bet."

Geoffrey proceeded laboriously to write: "G. Carey Neville," in his own hand-writing.

"But that is not how the governor signs his letters himself," remarked Weevil, "and that is the point in question. Show us how *he* does it, as near as you can."

"All right," answered Geoffrey. They put a piece of paper before him, and he wrote across it, just below the grimy finger which Weevil placed on it: "G. Carey Neville, late 170th Regt."

"You've won," said Weevil, handing over a sovereign to Templar. "You were nearer than I was. Now let's tear up these papers."

They did so ostentatiously, nor did Geoffrey notice that Weevil quickly removed from the rest the one scrap the young man had signed, and put it into his waistcoat pocket.

"Shall we go round to the Imperial for an hour?" suggested Templar.

"All right," said Geoffrey, who took his friend's arm to steady himself down stairs.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CASTLE CLARE.

"I BEG your pardon," exclaimed Mr. Tom Kirk, as he knocked against Colonel Neville, in the rush across the hall at Castle Clare. "The breakfast will be on the table in less than ten minutes. Don't be long over dressing. I'll be down myself in a jiffy."

Mr. Kirk was certainly not yet in full, nor even in morning dress. Over a suit of flannels he wore an apron which was tied round his neck, and reached almost to the ground. Under his arm was a napkin; on his head a little white cook's cap.

"You've been at it again, Tom?" said the Colonel, who had just returned from an early ride round some of the farms. "Why don't you leave Johnny to himself for a bit?"

"Because if I did, neither you nor I should get anything fit to eat," replied Mr. Kirk. Now don't waste time talking, but cut away and dress."

In a short quarter of an hour the two again met in the dining-room. It was cheerful and bright on this February morning, for it faced south-east, and the morning sun, breaking out slowly between misty clouds, shone straight into the windows. They overlooked Clare Haven, one of the numerous remote inlets on the rugged coasts of Ireland. The bay was calm, shimmering in the yellow sunlight. On the opposite side the hills rose steeply, clad with larch and beech, with here and there a dark-

green spruce among the bare trunks and branches. On the right the hill ended in an abrupt cliff, and jagged rocks, whose fantastic shapes resembled ruined castles and towers in the morning mist, guarded the entrance to the harbour. The broad Atlantic lay beyond, still shrouded in veils of sea-fog, which gave way but slowly and unwillingly before the increasing power of the sun.

"Try the omelette," said Tom. "I mixed it and beat it well. Upon my word it is not so bad, considering how difficult it is to make an omelette. Johnny shows some signs of dawning intelligence."

"It is capital," replied the Colonel. "But really I wish you would not worry yourself so much about the cooking, Tom. You've scorched your face already over that range."

"And a very bad one it is. I hope the new one we ordered from Dublin will arrive to-morrow. I'll set it up myself. You tell me not to worry about the cooking, but, by Jove! you'd find it very awkward if I did not."

"Oh, I have roughed it before now," replied Neville, laughing. "Old soldiers are not so particular."

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Kirk, impressively, and laying down his knife and fork, "you do not know how bad Irish cooking is, you really do not. Of course, at Dublin you were all right, and even the Royal Hotel at Kildonan is passable, though coarse in the extreme. But, upon my honour, I've been in a good many countries in the world, and I never saw anything so horrible as the way they spoil good food in this green island of theirs! Talk of the improvement of the land, and of Home Rule! Ridiculous. There is no future for Ireland until they know how to cook."

"You are very hard on the Irish," remarked Neville.

"Hard on them? My dear old man, I am not given to harsh judgments at all. But now confess, what did you think of Burt's dinner last night?"

"It was not very nice, I admit."

"Nice! Did you ever sit down to anything so horrible, anywhere, under any circumstances?" asked Mr. Kirk.

"Oh, yes!" said Neville. "I've sometimes fared much worse in the jungle."

"Precisely, in the jungle. But here is a man of wealth—one of the few men in the country who has really plenty of money. He has travelled, too, and ought to have learnt something. He gives a special dinner to welcome the biggest swell in the country—at any rate till Geoffrey comes. People drive fifteen miles to eat—one of the most awful dinners that ever was served."

"My dear Tom, it was not so bad as all that," interrupted the Colonel.

"My dear Neville," said Mr. Kirk, "no sentence which you could pass on that man would be too severe. Just think of the *menu*. Soup—well, it was not so very bad; in fact, the soup was the only thing fit to eat. But the Irish can make only one soup, and you soon get tired of it. It's a sort of thick beef tea, flavoured with parsnips. Then we had boiled cod, with oyster sauce. The cod was done to rags, so that whatever little flavour it ever had was gone altogether; and the oysters were swimming in a thin fluid, which I strongly suspect was merely flour and water warmed up. Then came what they call a curry, for an entrée. Curried ducks, too!"

"The curry was certainly not a success," admitted Neville.

"Success! I should think not. I will pass over the solecism of serving curry after fish. It is horrible and disgusting to us old Indians, but I suppose we must forgive these people, for they don't know better. But they could find a recipe for curry in any cookery book, and not serve up an awful yellow mess in a ring of sodden rice. Then came roast veal at one end, and three miserable boiled chickens at the other—chickens no bigger than larks, and without either fat or flesh—nought but feathers and bones. But as to the veal, my teeth are not bad ones, but I'm blessed if I could make any impression on the slice old Burt sent me."

"Poor Burt," remarked the Colonel.

"Poor Burt, indeed! You mean, poor us! Now I would have put up with it all, and have consoled myself with the

thought that I could grill a couple of bones for a little supper when we got home, if Mrs. Burt and that chap Warren had not spoilt my temper."

"How so?"

"Why, Mrs. Burt said, when I was at work on some stuff they called lemon pudding, that she liked giving dinner-parties. I asked her why? for I confess I did not see what pleasure there could be in having a lot of people round your table, and then giving them nothing fit to eat. 'Oh!' she said, 'I believe I am always successful, and people generally like doing what they do well.' Now, I'm a fairly accomplished liar, Neville——"

"You are, indeed," said the Colonel.

"Don't be nasty. I mean that I can generally say civil things to women, even if they are not strictly true. But, upon my honour, I could not stand this. My very soul revolted. I tried to tell her that she was certainly a successful dinner-giver; I tried my best, but the lie was too gross and palpable. It stuck in my throat. I could only smile vacantly. Fancy the audacity of the woman!"

"She did not know better. She did her best, and no doubt considered the dinner a good one."

"Impossible," said Mr. Kirk. "There are two alternatives only. She has been about, even, I believe, to Paris, and therefore has eaten a decent dinner or two. Now, either she is a congenital idiot, without palate, without taste and smell, or she made a bold and barefaced statement, knowing it was untrue! I think the latter is the correct solution."

"It was trying indeed," assented the Colonel.

"Her audacity was simply appalling," continued Kirk. "But that fellow Warren was quite as bad in his way. You heard him, did you not?"

"Yes," replied Neville. "He said to Burt that after that most excellent dinner, a cigar was very enjoyable."

"I could have knocked the beast down for so gratuitous a falsehood," said Tom. "Why should he volunteer it? Nobody asked him. There was something particularly offensive in

his fat complimentary leer at Burt, as if he really meant that he had enjoyed his food amazingly."

"Perhaps he did."

"Oh, perhaps so. There was plenty of bacon with the veal, and no doubt Mr. Warren thinks fat bacon the most delicious delicacy. Faugh!! But," continued Mr. Kirk, after a short pause, "what surprised me was, that while the sherry was filthy, and the claret a vile compound of sloes and other abominations, the champagne was remarkable; really quite remarkable. It was balm in Gilead; the one oasis in that terrible desert. And I assure you I stuck to the oasis, and asked for more without hesitation."

"You were quite right," said Colonel Neville. "It is very good wine."

"Capital! Where on earth did he get it? Why was everything else so filthy and the champagne so good?"

"I think I can tell you," remarked Neville, smiling, "if you particularly want to know."

"Yes, I *am* anxious about it."

"Well, *I* gave it him," said the Colonel, quietly. "It is Ayala, '74. He helped a good deal with the tenants while we were away, and I told my wine-merchants to send him a couple of cases at Christmas."

"Oh! that fully accounts for the milk in the cocoa-nut," said Mr. Kirk. "Now I understand. Look here, Neville: I'll do anything in the world for you, but don't ask me—please don't—to dine with Burts again!"

"I won't," replied the Colonel, laughing. "But it is time for me to go to work."

"I'm going to Kildonan by the twelve train about those horses," said Mr. Kirk. "I'll be back in time to cook the dinner."

"Don't come back at all, Tom," answered the Colonel. "Go straight on to Dublin, and get some decent food. I'll manage well enough with Johnny."

"What, leave you to eggs and bacon for breakfast, and roast mutton, badly done, for dinner? Never, old man. I'll not

desert you. No, we will see it through now we have begun. Only I do wish we had some hounds within reach."

"So do I," said Neville. "We must start a pack next year, and make Geoffrey huntsman."

"We'll start the pack," said Kirk, "but Geoffrey won't be able to hunt them, and, besides, they'll boycott us, as they did the Clare hounds that used to hunt this country."

"I think not," replied Neville. "Remember, there has been no one in the Castle for years; and all these poor people knew of their landlord was, that his agent asked them for rent, and turned them out if they did not pay. We shall improve matters now we are here."

"I trust you may, though I doubt it," said Kirk. "Things have gone too far. The National League would excommunicate you, and the hounds would be poisoned."

"We will try, anyhow. I have begun by getting the cottages and buildings repaired. Some of these places are not fit for pigs, and yet human creatures are obliged to live in them, and pay for them. When that is done, we will try and form a pack of hounds."

"I wish you'd get this house repaired as well," said Kirk. "Not a door shuts properly, and every window rattles if there's the least wind. I'll see that joiner fellow at Kildonan, and bring him down with me, if I can."

"Do, by all means," assented the Colonel. "Get him to bring all his tools, some nice dry hard wood, and a couple of workmen. We shall soon make things comfortable."

"At any rate, we will try. Now, what about these horses? How many do you want?"

"Well, you see, we've only that wretched cob that is to draw you to the station," answered the Colonel. "Burt has been good enough to lend me a nag to ride about on for a few days, but he's a horrid brute."

"Yes," interrupted Tom, "none but a brute would give such a dinner."

"I mean the horse, not the owner," continued the Colonel.

"Now, there's no doubt that I shall have to be here all the summer. Better get three or four useful ones if we can: one for the dog-cart, and a couple to ride."

"The auction begins at one," said Kirk. "I won't spend too much money."

"Spend what you think they are worth," replied the Colonel; "get something that will do for a time, at any rate. I should like to have a gallop with the Dromore hounds next Tuesday, if possible."

"So should I," said Kirk. "I've never hunted in Ireland, and I'm keen to try. To-day is Friday. I ought to be able to find something or other before next week."

"Good-bye, then, Tom," said Neville; "I must get across the water to see that man Regan, who complains that his place is tumbling about his ears, and that the land is worth nothing."

"Of course, they all say the same. Ta ta."

They left the room, and at the door met Jerry, butler, valet, and footman rolled into one.

"The letters, your honour," said Jerry, handing them to the Colonel, while Kirk, seeing there were none for him, took the newspaper.

He glanced over it rapidly while crossing the yard towards the stables. "'House counted out over the Reclamation Bill,'" he muttered; '"Bulgaria demands to be admitted to the conference of the Great Powers.' Ha; just like their cheek. 'Death of Count Plumostroff;' who cares about Plumostroff? 'Arab rising:' the beggars are always rising. Hullo! What's this."

He read as follows:

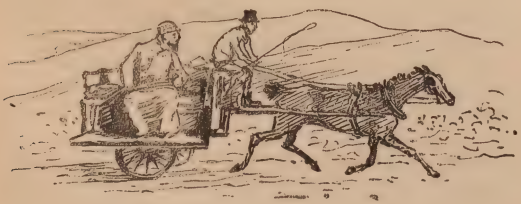
"Riotous Conduct of a Young Gentleman.—At Vine Street, yesterday, a well-dressed young man who attempted to conceal his identity, but was found out to be Mr. Geoffrey Clare, of Clare Castle, was charged with being drunk and disorderly, and assaulting the police in the Imperial Restaurant. The case was clearly proved and the defendant was fined five pounds. Instead of paying the money, Mr. Clare offered to toss the

magistrate double or quits. He was put back, and later in the afternoon brought up for judgment. After addressing the youth with some severity, Mr. Moggins doubled the fine, which was at once paid, and Mr. Clare left the Court with his friends."

There was also a short paragraph under the leaders on this subject, in which a few withering remarks were made on the folly and impertinence of the masher class, as exemplified in the case of Mr. Clare.

"He's a nice young man for a small tea party," said Mr. Kirk, when he had read the paper.

Jerry disappeared. He stuffed it into the pocket of his overcoat, and with the reflection that there was only one postal delivery a day at Castle Clare, hoped that the local gossips would not get hold of the paragraph. There was nothing else to be done. Better if the Colonel never heard of his ward's escapade; but it was impossible to prevent the neighbours telling him, if it became known. So Tom made up his mind to let things alone, and drove off to the nearest station, which was about four miles off.



CHAPTER XIX.

A HUNT.

"He is not pretty to look at," said Colonel Neville to Mr. Kirk next morning when the first of the new purchases was trotted out for his inspection.

"He is not, I admit," replied Tom Kirk; "but I understand he is a wonder, hipped though he is."

"Well," continued the Colonel, "I do not think I should care to ride him across country."

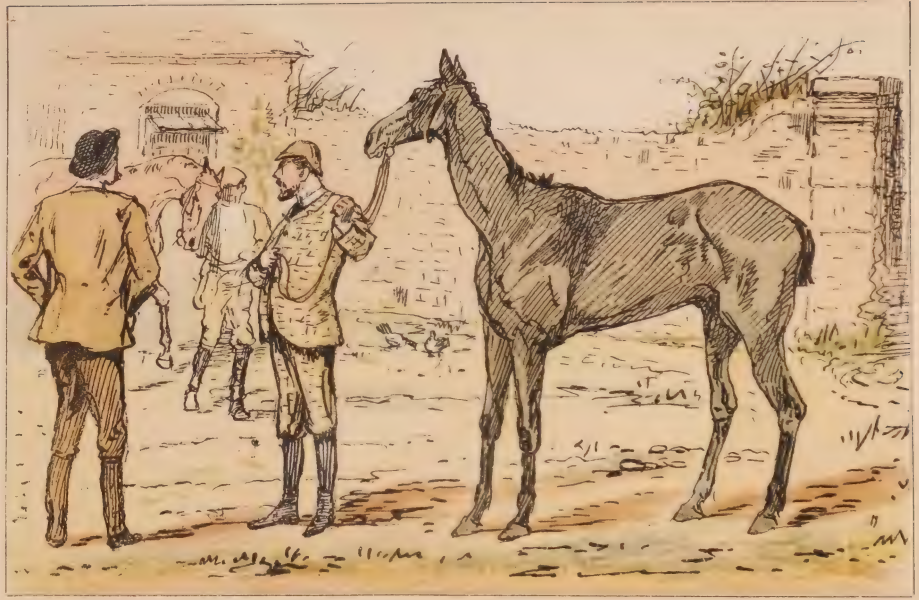
The horse was certainly no beauty. A strong, rough-looking black, with short legs, and very high withers, which made his ewe neck look particularly hideous, goose rumped, and one hip down, he was about the last animal which any English hunting man of means would have bought. The Colonel made up his mind that for once in a way Tom Kirk's judgment had been at fault. Hitherto, in India and in England, the civilian's experienced eye had not deceived those who, like the Colonel, trusted him implicitly. Now, however, he had evidently been taken in. That sleepy, underbred-looking brute might lollop along in harness, but could not possibly be a great hunter. However, he had not cost much money. A horse with a hip down does not generally fetch an extravagant price.

"We will call him the Camel," said the Colonel, after a second prolonged look at the animal's ungainly action as he was trotted round the paddock, "for he's quite as ugly as any dromedary, and nearly as big."

"He's a great hunting harse, yer honour," observed Jerry, the fossil coachman, who had for the last seven years looked after the one solitary animal in the Castle Clare stables.

"What makes you think so?" inquired the Colonel.

"It's Pat Donovan that tould me, yer honour," said Jerry. "He's a grand harse entirely. There's no harse in County Slane than can bate him lepping, nor for what they say, in county Carberry either."



"Bring the other one out, Mike!"

"If that's the case," said the Colonel, "I'll never trust my eyes again. Why, the poor devil would tire after three fields."

"Is it his hip ye mane, yer honour?" asked Jerry. "Shure that makes no difference at all, barrin' the look of it."

"Just see what shoulders he has," said Tom, "and what a width when you stand behind him. However, I must admit I bought him chiefly on the strength of his reputation. And anyhow, you won't lose much by him, as he stands you under thirty sovereigns."

"I should have put him down as worth about a fiver," observed Neville. "But bring out the next one, Jerry. Ah! that's more like a horse, though there's not quite enough of him."

"They call this one Obadiah," said Tom. "He belonged to a man who is not allowed to hunt, and I believe he is a very clever one indeed."

Obadiah was a corky-looking compact brown, about fifteen and a half hands; a good 'all round' horse; also somewhat coarse, but decidedly handsome, and as fit as a fiddle. The Colonel was pleased with him, but repeated his doubts as to his size.

"My dear fellow," said Tom, "this is not a flying country. It's of no use bringing your Leicestershire nags here. The fields are small and the fences big. You can't gallop much, and you want a very steady one."

"But I ride thirteen stone."

"God bless your honour and give you a long life," remarked Jerry, somewhat irrelevantly. "That little harse will carry your honour well."

"He was horribly expensive," said Mr. Kirk, "so he ought to be a good one. I had to give fifty for him."

Neville smiled. "You won't ruin me in horseflesh, anyhow. Now for the dog-cart horse."

This nag—a useful-looking chestnut—was duly trotted out and inspected.

It took some persuasion on Tom Kirk's part to induce his friend to get on the Camel's back, and after being jolted along for a mile, the Colonel regretted that he had mounted. A more uncomfortable conveyance it would have been difficult to find. It

was not the usual 'dot and carry one' of a lame horse, but a species of rocking motion from behind, which made the name selected for him appear singularly appropriate. After riding round a farm and talking to the tenant, who was of opinion that landlords had no right to exist, unless they forewent all claims for rent, but expressed this opinion most politely, Colonel Neville suggested that he would prefer getting on the chestnut, which one of the ragged hangers on of the place was riding behind them.

"Just try the black over a fence first," said Mr. Kirk, almost imploringly. "See, here is a nice grass field, and one of these Irish gates at the other end. Give him a canter and put him at it."

For those who do not know what an Irish gate is, it may be necessary to explain that the high banks of earth, often faced with stone, are occasionally broken by gaps, which are built up of loose stones piled one on the other to the height of from three to four feet. When cattle are turned into the field, the gate is opened, that is, the stones are pulled down. It takes about ten minutes to open an Irish gate, and at least half an hour to close one effectually, but then time is of little value in the southern and western portions of the island. Farmers who are particular about their cattle and do not wish them to stray, frequently lay a log or young tree along the top of the gate, which is then quite four feet high, and not by any means an insignificant jump.

"I would rather not jump him," said the Colonel. "He is sure to come down. I am too old to ride for a fall in cold blood."

"If you won't, I will," said Mr. Kirk, nettled at the contempt entertained for his purchase, "though I hate jumping."

"No," replied Neville, "if one of us is to come down, let it be me, for I'm used to it. Go on, old man! Why the brute has gone to sleep!"

The Camel was so quiet that it looked like it. But when the Colonel put him into a canter, he woke up, and, strange to say, the lurch disappeared, and he moved across the grass in good style. Neville then quickened the pace, and after taking him round the field at a good speed, set his head straight for the

'gate,' which was fortified by a log, and therefore a very respectable jump. Camel pricked his ears forward, and without the slightest hesitation, flew the ugly-looking gap, landing on the other side, and galloped on, pulling double.

Mr. Kirk, though, as he said, he hated jumping, followed his friend. Obadiah just 'tipped' the log with his hind legs in the

A very respectable jump

approved Irish fashion, and jerked his rider forward, but landed quite safely and cantered placidly to the opposite corner, where the Camel had apparently gone to sleep again.

"Well?" asked Tom.

"Well, I think he may do. I confess he can jump. But how long will he keep it up?"

"That remains to be seen. At any rate you will ride him on Tuesday with the Dromore hounds?"

"We shall have to rail to Kildonan the night before," observed the Colonel.

"Yes, and stop at the hotel. I shall not have any cooking to do," replied Kirk.

So it was agreed. At Kildonan they were assured that the meet at Cahirmore was about five miles off, or at most six, and having, of course, left their hunting map behind, the two friends believed their informant, and went to bed, after ordering their horses for ten o'clock. It struck the Colonel as rather curious that there were no hunting men starting from the hotel, but he attached little importance to this circumstance.

"Which way?" he asked the ostler, as he settled himself in the saddle.

"South, yer honour," replied the man.

"But which road?"

"The South road, yer honour. Across the bridge and along Carriganess road. Then better ask the way, yer honour."

The friends started quietly, having allowed themselves ample time for the short distance, as hounds were advertised for eleven o'clock, and would probably not meet punctually. After riding about four miles they thought it time to inquire.

"Is this the Carriganess road?" the Colonel asked of a man standing at one of the numerous lodge gates.

"It is, sir."

"How far is it to Cahirmore?"

"To Cahirmore is it, yer honour?"

"Yes, Cahirmore."

"I do not know, sir."

"You don't know Cahirmore?"

"I do not, sir."

"What is it the gentlemen are asking for?" said another man, stepping up. "Cahirmore is it? You've not come the right road. You must go back a bit, and turn wesht at the first cross."

On the point of starting, Kirk inquired:

"How far is it to Cahirmore?"

"A long way, sir," was the vague reply.

"But how far?"

"About seven or eight miles, sir."

Seven or eight miles, and they had already come three! There was no help for it, so they jogged back to the 'cross' (*i.e.*, cross-roads), and then turned 'wesht.' They had been instructed to ride through the town of Kilcoe, which they reached at about the time fixed for the hounds to meet. Here they inquired again.

"Is this the road to Cahirmore?"

"It is, sir."

"How far is it?"

"About eight or nine miles, sir," was the answer.

Things were getting desperate. Eight or nine miles still to go, and already eleven o'clock! The Colonel was for giving it up, and riding back to Kildonan.

"But," said Kirk, "we shall look such idiots. We come to the place with these horses, and get ourselves up in breeches and boots and all, and we ride off in state at ten o'clock; surely we cannot calmly go back to lunch and confess that we never found hounds at all."

"We never *shall* find them," moaned the Colonel. "Of course they will have gone away an hour before we get to the meet, and then it will be a stern chase across a country we don't know. There is nothing I detest so heartily."

"I admit that such a thing would be utterly beastly," replied Kirk. "But let us push on. We are sure to meet some friendly native who will put us on the track of hounds; and see what a lovely country it is. Not a ploughed field within miles."

Nor was there. Undulating pasture land, with a bog here and there in the valley, and an occasional steep 'pitch,' which might be awkward for a horse weak on his forelegs; banks overgrown with grass and furze, separating the fields; no ditches to speak of, no plough at all, and very few cottages. They trotted up a very long hill, easy but endless, and when they at last reached the summit, again inquired the way and the distance of a carter whom they overtook.

"Straight along the road to Ballydrimmon, then turn south."

"I ought to have brought a pocket compass," said the Colonel. "I'm blessed if I know which *is* south."

"Always have a compass," replied Kirk, producing a small one. "Not that we want it to-day, because it is bright. But after all, these people are really far more accurate than we are. To the left and to the right, change according to the direction in which you are going, while the points of the compass are immutable. How far is it to Cahirmore, my man?"

"It's about three miles to Ballydrimmon, and then just behint the town," was the answer.

"Hurrah!" shouted Kirk. But it was a weary three miles to Ballydrimmon; down hill now, and on a gentle incline, but there were too many 'ramblers' (Celtic for loose stones), to permit fast progress. Rapidly the spirits of the two went down. At last, with a yell, Kirk suddenly dashed off at a canter.

"What is it?" asked the Colonel, putting the Camel into a trot.

"A fellow going hunting! I saw him turn round that corner."

"Pooh!" said Neville. "Probably some farm lad on a cart-horse."

"Not a bit of it! I saw the breast plate and sandwich case, as he turned. It's all right. Come along."

Soon the person in question was overtaken. It turned out to be the typical Irish groom—a dirty, unkempt boy—on a worn-out grey.

"Do you know your way to Cahirmore?" asked the Colonel.

"I do, sir."

"Is it far from here?"

"About five miles, sir."

"The devil!" exclaimed both together. "A quarter to twelve o'clock and five miles to go. Are you riding your master's second horse."

"I am not, sir. This is his hunting harse. He belongs to Mr. Murphy. Mr. Murphy will be after driving out in his car."

"The deuce he will! But you will be very late, my boy," said Mr. Kirk.

"Will I, sir? What time is it, *plase?*"

"It's nearly twelve o'clock."

"It'll be full late then," replied the lad. And after a few minutes' thought, he added, "We'd better go on, sor."

Again the Colonel wished to turn back, but Tom dissuaded him. The grey was painfully slow, but as the youth volunteered to show them a short cut, they were unwilling to go ahead without him. Another long trot and a long silence followed. At last the Colonel, who was a little way on, yelled out, "Tally ho! All right," and opening an iron gate out of the lane, turned sharply up an avenue, galloping as fast as the Camel would go.

Through a plantation and up a hill, past the doors of a large, square grey house, where the numerous marks on the gravel showed that many horsemen had assembled.

Though the country was strange to him, Neville sniffed the chase as if by instinct, and the Camel laid himself down to his work, galloping across the soft sward of a park-like enclosure. From its height the blue sea was visible, sparkling in the sunshine. But the Colonel was not looking for the sea; his eyes were, on the contrary, turned landwards, scanning a belt of fir trees on the upper side. Swiftly he made for a path that led through them, and the next moment, throwing up his right arm, almost pulled the Camel on to his haunches.

"There he goes," he whispered, pointing to a rapidly diminishing quadruped in the distance. "Thank goodness we have not headed him."

Then for a deep "Tally ho! gone away," which would have puzzled a Celt to equal. The lower orders of the Irish can only screech, they can't hallo nor cheer. Their applause sounds like the yelling of a lot of affrighted women. Neville's deep voice however produced its effect. In two minutes the dark pine wood was enlivened by a number of speckled hounds and scarlet coats, who stooped to the scent and raced across the grass with loud music. They plunged into the thick gorse in which the fox had taken refuge. It was not a straight necked one they were on. He doubled and dodged in the gorse, and then crept back through the plantation, and then gave them about a hundred yards across the grass, and then dived down into a deep glen leading from the open country to the sea. A strange place this; a chasm cut into the hills, so well secured and sheltered that no rough wind could reach its solitudes. Here, in February,

brambles were still green; snow drops grew before the grass round them had had a frost to wither it; the graceful hart's-tongue fern still flourished in its summer brightness; a semi-tropical warmth and stillness hung in the thick branches of the overhanging trees. In Indian file the cavalcade slowly wound their way down the slope, the horses' feet sinking deep in the black fertile mould.

But the fox had chosen his refuge well. After much slow hunting he was given up, and scratching their faces, ruffling their hats, and not improving their tempers, the men scrambled back again up the hillside, to emerge on the breezy uplands with fresh hopes.

By this time several had noticed the strangers. And by the simple process of asking Tom Kirk what his friend's name was, and then asking Neville who *his* friend was, the identity of both was soon established. Tom, who was fond of blowing other people's trumpets, said, in answer to questions:

"Neville! Oh, a great man, you know. Looks after Castle Clare, while Clare is a minor, and lots of money of his own. Wonderful rider, too; only very few fellows can beat Neville."

Now this was, to say the least, rather imprudent of Master Tom. For there is nothing an Irish gentleman likes better than to take the shine out of an English sportsman, particularly if he has entertained him hospitably first. The result of Kirk's answer was soon apparent. After several small coverts had been drawn blank, a hospitable sportsman in a cap, one of the chief supporters of the hunt, suggested a brief adjournment to his house for a bit of lunch, adding courteously, that the Colonel's horse and his friends' would be glad of a quarter of an hour in a 'box stall' after their long drag over from Kildonan. The whole field accepted the offer, as the house was close by. The fact that the place was being repaired, and that to enter the dining room it was necessary to stoop under a scaffold plank, did not affect any one, and soon about twenty men were exchanging remarks in a rich brogue, while discussing biscuits, bread and cheese, and *vin du pays*, *i.e.*, whiskey and water.

"We'll show you a hunt, sir, by-and-bye," said one to Colonel Neville.

Two of the younger men were whispering in a corner, casting occasional glances at the Colonel, the meaning of which he was soon to discover.

"Do you hunt much in England?" asked one of them, a Mr. Long.

"Whenever I get a chance," replied Neville.

"Is it fast you go?"

"Well, some countries are faster than others. Ours is a good scenting country, and we have some fast bursts occasionally."

"Ah, we'll show you an Irish fox," said Mr. Barry, Mr. Long's friend. "There's always an old one in Stony Dell."

"I shall be very glad," said the Colonel.

"You'll find some queer fences," continued Mr. Long.

"They do not look very easy, certainly."

"That looks a good horse you've got, a nice hunting horse," said Mr. Barry. "Did you bring him with you?"

The answer to this question, which might have changed the views of Messrs. Long and Barry, was checked by the master giving the signal for a start. Soon all were assembled on the grassy brow of a hill, overhanging Stony Dell, a narrow, but very thick covert of gorse, brambles, and stunted oak. Quickly the hounds' tongues proclaimed a find, and all were at attention. In five minutes more there was a screech from the upper end, and the field suddenly divided. Those who meant going raced along the hill parallel to the hounds; those who preferred not to jump, turned up a 'boreen,' or narrow lane to the right. If Tom Kirk had known the country, he would probably have joined the latter division, but as he did not, he preferred keeping within sight of the hounds, and this in Ireland means a lot of jumping. For there are but few gates, and these are in most cases generally padlocked, while the gaps are such as Camel and Obadiah had practised over at Castle Clare, and by no means things to creep through.

The little hounds went away very fast, and for a few hundred yards all spun over the close firm turf of the hill merrily, the Colonel thinking, as he watched Mr. Barry's thoroughbred cantering easily, within himself, that Camel was far too slow and

too coarse for this style of thing. But soon they approached a fair bank. Each man of the leaders picked his place, and Neville judiciously followed one of them at a respectful distance. Good rider as he was, he very nearly tumbled over the horse's head on landing, so entirely did the momentary dwell on the top of the bank disturb his balance. He only recovered with a struggle, rather ashamed of himself, and resolving to sit well back next time. This he did successfully, and in the third field the hounds threw up, foiled by sheep.

Tom Kirk had got along somehow, and took advantage of the check to approach his friend.

"Mind what you are about, Neville. These fellows have determined to ride you down."

"Which fellows?"

"That one they call Long, on the brown, and his friend there on the thoroughbred. I heard them settle it. Long is to lead, and Barry is to follow. They will make you kill yourself, if you don't mind."

"Not a bit of it," said the Colonel. "All right. But they've the heels of me."

"But their nags can't jump a bit better than yours," said Tom. "It's lovely to see him. I had every chance, because I always waited till some fellow made a hole in the banks, and lowered them a bit for me."

"They're on him!" exclaimed the Colonel.

And this time the scent seemed better. After covering a few small fields with average banks, all of the same description, the Colonel noticed with pleasure that the Camel made up his lost ground rapidly at every jump. He was far quicker over than the majority, and dwelt less time on the top. So Neville sat down in his saddle, and began picking his own places, drawing up level with Mr. Long. Topping a bank rather bigger than usual, that gentleman looked to the left, and saw the Colonel, on which he at once spurred his horse, and stole away across the next field, while Mr. Barry rushed up on the other side with a screech of "Forward! forward!" It very soon became evident that Mr. Long was not riding to hounds so much as riding for

"Fell into the 'boreen' with a crash."

the Colonel. He bore away to the right, apparently on purpose to jump a particularly nasty place, a high bank faced with stone, and covered with furze at the top. Neville also swerved slightly from the line hounds were taking, determined not to be beaten, and touching Camel with the spur (for the first time), faced the same very objectionable bank. There was a little hesitation, a momentary wavering, from the horse. But Neville's hands were down on his withers and his spurs in his flanks. So he faced it, his rider giving him his head to jump up to the top of the obstacle. It was well got over, though the drop on the far side seemed as if it never would end. "Well leapt," cried some one behind, while Long and Barry, with the Colonel between them, raced across a rough rocky field, which would have brought many an English hunter to grief. Neville stood up in the saddle to try and see over the next jump, a masonry wall, not more than four feet high, bounding one of those narrow, steep, and stony lanes, so common in the south and west of Ireland.

"It's in and out," thought the Colonel, "and probably awful hard landing. However, here goes."

All three were abreast. Long tipped the top of the wall, and very nearly knocked his horse's brains out against the opposite bank, so narrow was the lane. Camel jumped the wall in his stride, and pulling up dead, would have shot some people into the next field. But Barry's horse, probably supposing that the wall was as usual built of loose stones, hit it hard with his knees and fell into the boreen with a crash.

"Not hurt, I hope?" said Neville, pulling his horse round, and adding to himself, "Settled one of them, at any rate."

"All right," gasped Barry, scrambling to his feet; "go on."

The Colonel did not wait for the order to be given a second time. He jumped out of the lane through a gap, and was soon level again with Long. By this time he had entirely forgotten hounds, as he took his fences in a steeple-chase after nothing at all. Both were aroused to the situation by wild yells and screeches from behind them, while a person in dittoes, on foot, rushed across the field, and held up his hands imploringly.

"Stop, you're heading the fox. I saw the varmint cross my

field just now. What are you riding after? Hounds are half a mile behind you."

Both pulled up, the Colonel thoroughly ashamed of himself. Soon the master of the Dromore Hounds came up, with some of the hard riders.

"Gintlemen, gintlemen, what *are* you doing? Sure they were going fast enough for you? Mister Long, Mister Long, you should not be mislading strangers. It's taking care of them you ought to be. And Mr. Barry there is after falling in the boreen, with all the wind knocked out on him.

"You're a good sportsman, any way," said Mr. Long, jumping off his panting horse, and holding out his hand to the Colonel, which of course the latter shook warmly.

"It's a grand lepper, by jabers," remarked another, admiringly looking at the Camel, who at once began nibbling the sweet grass.

"The gintleman has a foine sate, to be sure. And poor Mr. Barry, too! it's easht of the horse yer fell, by the looks of yer coat, sor," said the person in dittoes.

"Hauld yer tongue, man!" replied Mr. Barry, struggling up. "It was wesht, to be sure. Where's this divil of a fox, thin?"

He had taken refuge in a drain. "Let's go home," said the Colonel to Tom. "I have had a good gallop, and it's twenty miles back." So they went.

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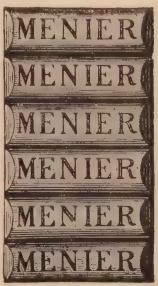

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CHAPTER XX.

LARKSPUR AND SILEX.

A PLEASANT bright March day at Kempton Park. Geoffrey is in high spirits. He is in the club stand, and on his arm is the lovely Mrs. Flatman, gracefully arrayed in the very costume which they had ordered together and which by superhuman efforts the fashionable tailor had sent home in time. Perhaps some day Geoffrey may have to pay for the extra hands put on by that tailor, and also for the handsome sealskin cape which protects those delicate shoulders from the keen air. Mr. Seaton Delaval, who has run up from Bankshire for a day or two, wonders where he has seen that portentously smart lady before, and how Geoffrey happens to be her escort. Mr. Egerton Paull is also in the enclosure with his young wife, and is just about to nod to Geoffrey when he notices the lady on his arm, and abstains. Our hero considers this only another piece of Paull's insufferable impertinence—"side," he calls it. From others too, from people whom Geoffrey does not know, there are curious glances and questioning looks. They, of course, are put down to the admiration excited by the beauty of the lady whose knight he has the honour to be.

To Templar the club enclosure is forbidden. "It was not worth his while," he told Geoffrey, "to pay ten guineas a year for the privilege. He was a poor man, and could not afford it." He did not think it necessary to mention, that if he *had* thought it worth his while to assault that sacred citadel, he would have been repulsed by a veritable shower of black balls. However, Templar is in the ring, and Geoffrey joins him, leaving his charge under the care of young Mellis, his Eton friend.

"I suppose Joyce's nag is the one to back for this race?" remarked Geoffrey.

"Not for worlds," answered Templar, lowering his voice, and taking the young man by the arm, he drew him aside. "Don't say a word, Geoff, and I'll put you on a good thing."

"All right," replied the youth. "It's O.K. with me."

"Remember," repeated Templar, solemnly pointing to the enclosure, "you must not give the tip to any of your swell pals in there."

"Drive on, old man! All square."

"Well, Joyce's mare Larkspur ought to win, and she's a red-hot favourite."

"Rather," answered Geoffrey. "Why listen, they're wanting odds on her."

"Just so; she can gallop and jump too."

"Well, then, why not back her?" asked the youth innocently.

"Because she won't win," replied Templar mysteriously. "Have you got any dibs?"

"Well, you know you got old Flatman to fork out another century yesterday. I've some of that left."

"You rascal," remarked Templar, poking his friend in the ribs playfully. "You borrow a cool hundred from a chap, and then take his wife off on the spree. You're a real bad lot, you are."

"Oh, it's all right about the lady. Nothing but what is strictly honourable, I assure you," said Geoffrey, highly flattered at being called 'a real bad lot' by a man of the world like Templar.

"Of course, of course. All right, old chap, *I* shan't peach. Though I don't know whether I'd have exactly brought the lady to Kempton if I wanted to keep things quiet. Now, look here: do you want to make a little money?"

"Certainly I do, as I had to give old Stick-in-the-mud a bill for a hundred and fifty at three months."

"Very well. Then just go into that bird-cage there, and lay your swell friends all you know against Larkspur, down to your last shirt."

"Are you quite sure she won't win?"

"Mum's the word. Do as I tell you, and keep your eye on young Higgins, that's riding her."

"Right," said Geoffrey, nodding to his friend, and returning to the enclosure.

"Hallo," cried Seaton Delaval, "where's your fair friend?"

"I've left her in charge of a fellow on the club stand," replied Geoffrey, concealing his special dislike to Mr. Delaval, with a view to a bet. "Know anything about this race?"

"Well," replied Delaval, "at the weights, it ought to be a gift for Larkspur. Eleven stone only, two miles, which is just her distance, and young Higgins up—quite the best of the light-weight gentlemen riders. He can hold his own over a dozen fences any time, though he's not quite up to Liverpool form yet. I'm just off to back her. They want six to four in there, and I may be able to get better terms outside."

"I rather fancy *Rouge Croix*," said Geoffrey; "the Frenchmen are dangerous just now."

"Not a chance," laughed Delaval. "A good useful hunter, no doubt, but no quality at all. Can't gallop with these. But there's no time to lose, there they come. If I'm not sharp I shan't get the money on."

"Hold on a bit," exclaimed Geoffrey. "I'll bet against Larkspur if you like, and save you going into the ring."

"You?"

"Yes, why not? Ain't I good enough?"

Seaton Delaval made a rapid calculation. Clare, of Castle Clare, was not of age yet, but a large fortune was inalienably his, and even during his minority, his guardian would never let him repudiate a debt of honour. But was it fair to take such a greenhorn in?

"Oh, you're good enough for more than I want to put on," he said at last. "But I don't like robbing you. Now it's the business of those fellows there, and no one has any qualms about *them*."

"Rob me, and welcome," replied Geoffrey. "Will you lay a hundred to eighty?"

"If you like," said Delaval, pulling out his betting book. "Make it fifty to forty."

"No. A century, or nothing," replied Geoffrey, who at the moment had caught sight of Templar on the other side of the rails, nodding in a reassuring manner.

"Very well. So be it," said Delaval, booking the bet. "Now let's get up stairs to see them."

Geoffrey joined his fair companion, and whispered to her that Templar had put him on a good thing. She looked, he thought, just a trifle anxious, and inquired which horse he had backed. "Hush," said he, stooping to her ear. "I have laid against the favourite, Joyce's mare."

The preliminary canter was over, and the horses were on their way to the starting-post. There were only five of them, and Larkspur was now such a favourite, that the "gentlemen" were laying seven to four on her. Though Geoffrey had implicit confidence in his friend, he could not repress a certain feeling of anxiety as he watched the parti-coloured group assembled, Larkspur's bright blue and Rouge Croix's red conspicuous against the turf. The delay was not long, as it seldom is in steeplechases, and they came on over the first jump and round the bend towards the stand apparently all together. But as they approached it became evident that Midget, a small chestnut mare, was making the running with a clear lead of the other four. "She's forcing the pace for Larkspur," remarked a man next to Geoffrey. "Over they go," exclaimed the spectators excitedly, as Midget cleared the water jump with a yard to spare, and Larkspur followed on the inside, Higgins keeping her well in hand. At the next place one of them refused obstinately, and only four were left to run it out, Midget still leading, the favourite about ten lengths behind, with old Mars on her quarters, and Rouge Croix last. Then, for a couple of minutes, nothing was seen except now and then a cap in the distance, apparently labouring with difficulty over rough ground. When they swept into view once more, the blue jacket

was still second, but rapidly closing on Midget, and Rouge Croix was tailing off hopelessly. Geoffrey began to feel anxious.

"I am afraid that blue one will win," whispered Emmeline.

Indeed, it looked like it. At the turn for home Larkspur had collared the leader, who retired beaten, and came sailing on towards the last hurdle apparently full of running, Mars second,

then Midget, and last of all Rouge Croix, labouring on in the rear. "The favourite wins! Larkspur wins in a canter! A hundred to ten on Larkspur!" Such were the yells that rose from the stand, shouted by a thousand throats. Geoffrey's heart beat violently. Where was he to get another eighty? It had been terrible hard work to screw that last hundred out of Flatman. The favourite galloped up to the hurdle, but to the surprise of everybody, instead of taking it in her stride, swerved and

bolted sideways. It required all Mr. Higgins' presence of mind, skill, and strength of muscle, to prevent her jumping at the high wing on the left. Quickly, and in the most workmanlike manner, he brought her round, and cramming the latchfords into her side, drove her at the hurdle, which this time she jumped without hesitation. But short as had been the delay, it was long enough to let up old Mars, who was on the extreme outside, and taking his hurdle like the professor he was, had galloped over quite fifty yards of the straight run in, before Larkspur had negotiated the sticks. Higgins did his level best, but his chance was gone. Mars carried his twelve stone past the winning-post with two lengths to spare, amid the approving roar of the ring.

"D—n that fool Higgins!" said one man near Geoffrey.

"It is a blooming sell," exclaimed another.

"That was a near shave," whispered Geoffrey, a weight removed from his mind. "Let's go and have lunch before the next race."

On their way he was stopped by Delaval. "Here, Mr. Clare, you had better take your money now," he said: "I shan't be in town on Monday."

And with these words he handed our hero a bundle of crisp Bank of England notes.

"Thank you," said Geoffrey.

"You knew a little more than I did," continued Mr. Delaval. "I need not have been afraid of robbing you."

"Well, it was a near thing," replied Geoffrey.

"Very," answered Delaval, sarcastically. "Poor Higgins very nearly won against his will. However, he's too good a rider to come in first when he does not want to."

"What do you mean?" asked Geoffrey, angrily.

"Oh, nothing," replied Delaval. "At any rate, *you* would not know anything about it." And he turned on his heel.

"How did you work it?" whispered a thick voice in Geoffrey's ear when he was helping Mrs. Flatman to a delicate slice of turkey.

"First rate," replied Geoffrey, recognising Weevil. "Got a century."

"Paid?"

"Yes, paid."

"Put you up to one on this race then," said Weevil, still in a whisper; "we've got a dead certainty."

"I'm having lunch. What's your tip?"

"Can't tell you yet, but it will be all right in five minutes."

"I don't like betting in the dark."

"Oh, you can trust me, you know. It's going to be good enough to bet your last hat on."

"Very well," answered Geoffrey, giving him the notes, "but come back and tell me what you've put it on, and don't bet if you don't know."

Weevil laid his dirty finger against his red nose and disappeared. When the two were discussing some cold apple tart and cream, he came back again. "Silex is the tip. It's only over hurdles, and it's as safe as the bank. Two to one I've got you. Have any more on, now you're in luck?"

"Oh, do put on a pony for me, *dear* Mr. Clare," said Emmeline's gentle voice, "as you seem always to win."

"Certainly," replied Geoffrey, gallantly. "Here's another pony, Weevil. Try and get the same odds. Anything for your sake, darling," he whispered.

"I will," answered that gentleman, departing gleefully, while Geoffrey and Emmeline hastened to finish their lunch so that they might see the race.

"Weevil has backed Silex for you, I understand," remarked Templar, who met them on their way back. "I would not have put on quite so much if I had been you."

"What? Is there anything wrong?" asked Geoffrey, anxiously.

"No, I believe it's a moral. But still, I would have kept a bit of my winnings back, just for a nest-egg. Poor Weevil is always sanguine. He's been ruined by that hopeful disposition of his!"

"Oh, you are always so beastly cautious, Templar," said Geoffrey. "Not half a sportsman."

"I like to see my way quite clearly, particularly for my friends," answered Templar. "I should be a rich man now, if I had been as careful for myself as I am for them."

"I believe you, old man," said Geoffrey, impulsively shaking his mentor's hand. "Sorry I spoke."

Captain Templar's foreboding of evil unfortunately proved too true. After a good race, Silex was beaten by half a length, and the ring once more skinned the lamb. The intelligent reader need scarcely be informed that Geoffrey's hundred and twenty-five pounds were never staked at all. The amount was simply divided between the two confederates.

"I told you to be careful!" said Templar, in a melancholy voice, as they walked to the station.

"It's the very deuce," replied Geoffrey. "I've hardly any money left, so I must go back to-morrow. When will you come down, old man?"

"When you like," answered Templar.

"Mrs. Flatman and her friend Mrs. Cloynes are going to favour me with their company," continued Geoffrey, proudly. "You might take care of them down."

"Certainly," said Templar.

"Monday, then? To-morrow's Friday, and I'll get things straight down there."

"Monday. So be it. Tata, old man. Good-bye, Mrs. Flatman. Don't let our young friend get into mischief."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HALL.

WAS great excitement in the servants' hall at Templeton Manor on the Tuesday evening. In fact, more than once it looked almost as if a revolt had been imminent. Such a catastrophe as a strike on the part of the servants might possibly have occurred if there had been any unanimity. But popular assemblies are seldom unanimous (unless they have been judiciously packed beforehand), and the large company which assembled in the 'hall' at and after supper, was no exception to the rule. The coachman and Colonel Neville's groom were always welcome, though they did not board in the house, but on this night, François the cook, and Mr. File the butler, raised no objection to the unusual visit of the two other men employed in the stables. There was a feeling of excitement and unrest about the whole household, and the atmosphere was charged with electricity as well as with the fumes of what had been an excellent supper. The events of the previous day were indeed such as to justify some discussion below stairs. Two fashionably dressed ladies, both young, and both with some pretensions to

good looks, had arrived from town, and had occupied the two best spare bedrooms. With them came our friend Captain Templar, and, by the next train, Mr. Weevil and Mr. Mellis had also joined the home party. At dinner the visitors had been talked of, but only in whispers, by people sitting next to each other. For it was felt that in the presence of the scullery maid and of the dirty boy-of-all-work, who waited on the other servants, any loud remarks would be indiscreet, besides being premature. And Mr. File prided himself on his discretion. There ought, of course, to have been two tables at Templeton Manor; butler, valet, cook, and housekeeper ought to have had their meals 'private like' in the housekeeper's room. But Colonel Neville had resolutely set his face against this arrangement, and the matter was compromised, though not entirely to the satisfaction of the upper servants, by Mr. File and Mrs. Squib sitting together at one end of the table, with François next to them, and Pewter close by, assuming an air of patronising superiority towards the οἱ πόλλοι, which might have put many a duke and duchess to shame.

"You may go, now," said Mr. File, to the two scrubs. "Put the dessert on the table and make tracks."

"Right you are, Mr. File," said John, the upper footman.

"Who spoke to you, sir?" asked File. "We don't want your opinion."

"Beg your pardon, Mr. File," replied John, collapsing.

Then, the attendants having retired, a great silence fell over them all. The juniors thought much, but did not dare to speak first. The seniors nodded to each other over their wine in their usual way, but Mr. File's brow was contracted, François' generally merry eyes were veiled in melancholy, while Mrs. Squib looked the picture of misery. The necessary spark, which was to explode the highly inflammable opinions accumulating round the table, was given by the entrance of the coachman and his acolytes. The former dignitary was welcomed even more warmly than usual, and Mrs. Squib made room for him between herself and François.

"Well, ladies and gents," said he, taking up the glass of sherry which File had silently filled for him, "here's to your good 'ealths. I thought I'd come up and have a bit of jaw about this 'ere company."

"'Ear, 'ear," said Pewter.

"It's a rum go, any how," continued the coachman.

"It are," said File, emphatically, "a werry rum go, Mr. Wain."

"What do you say about it, Mr. File?" asked Wain.

"Say about it?" replied the butler, far too cautious to compromise himself by any bold opinion which might not prove the popular one, and imitating in his caution the statesmen who send up *ballons d'essai* through subordinates. "I 'ave my own view, of coorse; but I should like to 'ear *yours* first, Mr. Wain, as a man of the world, you know."

"Well," answered the coachman, well pleased to be able to open the debate: "I may tell you, ladies and gents, that when my friend, Mr. File (with a polite nod towards the chairman) calls me a man of the world, 'e ain't very far from the mark. I've been in the very best 'ouses in England, and I've 'ad markisees, aye, even dooks and duchesses, a sittin' behind me."

"'Ear, 'ear," said Pewter again, with a decided inflection of sarcasm.

"There may be fellas," continued Mr. Wain, with a withering glance at Pewter, "who don't much believe in 'igh life. But all I can say is, that a man learns the ways of the great world when live lords and ladies ride in his carriage."

"Quite right, Mr. Wain," murmured File.

"And," Mr. Wain went on, "it wants a man who's used to that sort of thing to find out the difference. Now my opinion is, that them parties what come down here yesterday ain't in no sort of sassiety at all, and the Colonel, bless his 'eart, would not stand them for a day, no, not for a *h*our, if 'e were here 'isself."

There! the dam was broken. Mr. Wain had given an unbiased opinion based on many years' experience of fashionable life. Now the floodgates of conversation were set open, and a chorus

of assents welcomed his brief speech. When the voices had somewhat subsided, Mr. File began:

"I agree with you, Mr. Wain. That Captain that cum down with the ladies" (with an ironical sneer in the voice, and a slight wink of the left eye) "ain't no Captain at all; at least, he ain't no gentleman. What do *you* say, John? You *ought* to know, seeing as how you unpacked his portmanty, and have vally'd him since."

John felt himself taller by two inches. His evidence was of value, and he knew it. The housemaids looked eagerly towards him. Mrs. Squib waited impatiently for his answer.

"Very inferior clothes; not fit for any *real* gentleman," said he: "and as to his linen, law, I almost made my fingers bleed touching and 'andling of it, it's so coarse!"

"'Ow disgusting!" exclaimed Pewter.

"'Orrid," echoed John. "Boots? why, he 'aint got no boots, to speak of. There's a pair of inferior pumps, pretty well wore out; then there's top-boots——"

"Aye?" interrupted Pewter: "you can know a gentleman by his top-boots. What about them?"

"Never been on," replied John. "Bought or borrowed, or may be stolen for the occasion. Then there's an old pair of butchers, and 'ouse boots with elastic sides. Fancy a real gentleman wearing elastic sides!"

"'Taint likely," remarked Mr. File.

"Of course not. And there's a sort of 'alf and 'alf boot he come in, a kinder mixture of shooting and walking boot, with grey gaiters to 'ide the patches. Now you know *my* opinion, ladies and gents."

"Miss Verry," said Mr. File, gallantly turning to the upper housemaid, "you ladies are the best judges of the *sect*. Now what do you say about this Mrs. Flatman and 'er friend?"

"They've beautiful things," replied Miss Verry, blushing. "They dress lovely."

Mr. File whispered to Mr. Wain, "Of course these girls can't tell. But you and I, as men of the world, *we* know the differ-

"More brandy and more soda!"

ence. There's things we ought not to talk about before young women."

Mr. Wain nodded a nod of deep meaning.

"None of them are so bad as that chap as came last," remarked John.

"To be sure, John, I was almost forgetting him," replied File, kindly. "He asked me for a brandy and soda before 'ed been five minutes in the 'ouse, and he took two sherries and bitters before dinner. He's a seedy lot, to be sure."

"I can't say a word for him," remarked Pewter. "'E and the Captain was always about with my governor when he was in town, but he's a bad lot, as sure as eggs is eggs. I think I seed him afore, too, only I can't rightly call to mind where."

"It ain't what *I* should call very choice company, altogether," said Mr. Wain. "And the question is, what's to be done?"

"Aye, that's it; you've 'it the nail on the 'ead, Mr. Wain. 'Ave another glass of wine. What's to be done?"

"I don't see that *we* can do anything," John ventured to remark.

"'Old your jaw, sir," said File, severely; "let your betters speak first. Don't be presumptious."

Again John collapsed. The affability of his chief had made him forget himself for the second time.

"Well," remarked Wain, "Mr. Geoffrey has asked them all down, and now they're 'ere, what's to be done with 'em?"

"They 'ad nine bottles of the Colonel's '74 Pommery for dinner, yesterday, and as much more to-day," remarked Mr. File, "besides two bottles of sherry, and Madeira and port; and they're sucking up brandies and sodas, now, over a game of cards."

At that moment a thundering peal at the library bell was heard.

"Go and see what's hup, John," said Mr. File.

There was silence until he returned.

"More brandy and more soda-water," said the young man: "and we're to bring it sharp."

"That's what it is," remarked Mr. File to the company. "It will be card-playing and liquoring night and day now. Oh, dear! oh, dear! what would the Colonel say to this in a respectable 'ouse?"

"But what would you suggest, Mr. File?" asked Mrs. Squib.

"I'm 'arf inclined to write to him," replied File.

"That's a strong order," said the coachman; "but I'm not sure that it ain't the best thing to do."

The housekeeper and François concurred. "It is no pleazure," remarked the latter, "to cook dinnare for such peoples. They do not understand nossing. Zey drink and zey eat, but, *parole d'honneur*, zey eat like pigs. Now give me a real *connoisseur*, like Monsieur Tom."

"'Ear, 'ear," again remarked John. "'E 's a gentleman, and no mistake."

"A gentleman! a real iglif," replied François. "If zere is anyssing wrong—naturally, sometimes zere is a leetle mistake somewhere—zen Monsieur Tom come into ze kitchen in ze morning and zay quite quitely, 'François, mon ami, what you sink of that beef sauce last night? You sink it was all right? Zen my palate is out of order. I must take medicine, I am afraid. One can be mistaken. I sought there was a soupçon too much sherry.' *Parole d'honneur*, when a gentlemen speak like zat, it goes to the heart. I throw down my napkin and I say, 'Monsieur Tom have reason. I forgot myself. I let the spoon overflow. Forgive me, it shall not arrive again. Monsieur has no want of medicine.'"

"But all this don't 'elp us," interrupted File, who had listened with some impatience to François' enthusiastic speech. "Shall I write to the governor, or shan't I?"

"I wouldn't if I was you," remarked Pewter. "He might turn up nasty, you know."

"But 'e wouldn't stand this company himself."

"Praps not, but 'e ain't no objection to Mr. Geoffrey having a bit of a fling. Arter all, they ain't done no worse than drink the wine, and it was bought to be drunk, I suppose."

"That's true," replied Mr. Wain, "they ain't done no 'arm to the 'orses, and they shan't if I can 'elp it. But I've 'ad to send into Bancaster three times to day."

"That ain't a reason for writing to the Colonel," observed Pewter, with much good sense. "'E'd say the wine was bought to be drunk, and the 'orses to be druv."

"So he might," assented File; "but he'd come back devilish sharp if he knew what rapscallions was here."

"Oh, Mr. File!" exclaimed Mrs. Squib, "what dreadful language! I'm quite shocked."

"Beg pardon, I'm sure," said Mr. File. "I really forgot that ladies was present. *I* think the Colonel ought to be wrote to, just to give 'im a 'int, you know."

"I don't," said Pewter, firmly. "*I* say, let my guv'nor have his spree. He's a young man, and he'll sow his wild oats some time."

"But there ain't no call to sow 'em in Templeton Manor," observed Wain.

"Well, he's been doin' of it pretty free in town, too," Pewter was forced to admit. "This 'ouse ain't got no monopoly of them, don't you fancy. But I wouldn't write to the Colonel if I was you, Mr. File. You don't know how 'ed take it, you see."

"That's the worst of it. The Colonel 'as only been 'ome so short a time, that we don't 'ardly know him. 'E might round on us."

"It's very likely," said Pewter.

"But it's my dooty to look after his property, wine and spirits, you know," observed Mr. File, "and I'm bound to do it at any sacrifice. Have another glass of the old East Indian, Wain? No? Then I'll get out a bottle of the Irish whiskey—some Mr. Tom brought over as a present to the Colonel: it's A 1, I can tell you. Now," he continued, "what am I to do when I see his wine and everythink being wasted in that shameful way?"

"It's very awkward," said Wain.

"What'll I say when he comes back, and asks for the Pommery 74?"

"You'll have to say it's all gone," said Pewter.

"Then *your* guv'nor 'ill get into a row," answered File.

"Better him than us," observed Wain.

"Right you are, my boy. But ain't there no way of doing it without putting our foot into it?"

"I don't see none," said Wain, while François shrugged his shoulders.

"What d'you say to a 'nonymous letter?" suggested John, timidly, seeing the rest of the pack at fault.

"A what?" came from several voices.

"A 'nonymous letter," continued John. "A letter signed 'your sincere friend,' or 'your well-wisher,' or something of that sort. He'd know it came from somewhere in Bankshire, but he wouldn't put the blame on any of us."

"I ain't fond of that sort of thing," remarked Mrs. Squib. "It seems underhand. It ain't quite honest."

"Honest be blowed!" exclaimed File. "It's done with the best intention. John," he added, patronizingly, "you ain't quite such a fool as you look. That idear of yours might be worth looking into, anyhow."

But now it was time for the juniors, at any rate, to retire; and a select party adjourned to the housekeeper's room. The result of the consultation between Mrs. Squib, File, Wain, and Pewter, was the following letter, which was addressed to the Colonel, and which Wain undertook to post at Chalford, in order that it should not bear the Bancaster post mark:—

"Onnered Sir,—There is goings on at the Manor wich you wood not approve of nowhow. Mr. Geffrey has brort some frends from London, both mail and phemail, and they are a drinking of all the best wine, and playing kards all nite. Youd best cum over and sea, or rite and stop him.

"A Sinceer Frend."

CHAPTER XXII.

MR. CLOVER'S HARRIERS.

WERE very late at breakfast next morning at Templeton Manor, all but Captain Templar, who, somehow, always managed to get up early and to look fresh, whatever had been his amusements of the previous night. On this particular morning he turned out for an early walk. It was, of course, quite a chance that he met the rural postman on his way to deliver the letters at the lodge. It was also only because Templar was a good-natured man that he offered to relieve him of the packet for the Manor, and thus save him a quarter of a mile walk. Volunteering the statement that he was stopping in the house, Templar took the newspapers and letters from the official, who was glad to shorten his work by ever so little, and still more glad when half-a-crown was tendered to him with the remark, "Rather a late Christmas box, but I'm always glad to help you post-office people when I can." As Templar entered the lodge gates, he held up the letters to the keeper, saying, "I will take them up

to the house." So he did. But not at once. For, as he felt sure that the rest of the party would be late, there was ample time to explore the recesses of the shrubbery, and Templar opened a wicket-gate from the avenue and entered a dense clump of laurels. Here, under a spreading cedar, was a seat obviously intended for the convenience of flirting couples in the summer, so secluded from observation was it, and yet so near the house in case of a sudden "bolt" being necessary. Templar carefully examined the various missives he held in his hand. There were many circulars for Colonel Neville, a few private letters for him and Tom Kirk, and a bundle of bills for Geoffrey. All these he placed on a seat by his side, unopened. But, one letter addressed to the Colonel he examined very carefully, and after some hesitation, cut the envelope. It was only a trade circular, and he stuffed it into his pocket. Another was treated in the same way, and a smile of exultation lighted up his features. Any one looking over Templar's shoulders would have read as follows:—

"Middlesex Bank, *Feb.* ——, 18—.

"Sir,—A Bill for Eight thousand three hundred pounds, drawn by a Mr. Weevil, and purporting to be accepted by you, was presented to us for discount to-day. We should have had no hesitation in discounting this bill if the drawer were known to us. As, however, this is not the case, and as we have not hitherto had any of your acceptances through our hands, we shall be glad to know whether the draft is in order. A duplicate of this letter goes to the Pallas Club.

"If your signature is correct, you need not trouble to reply.

"Yours obediently,

"For the Middlesex Bank,

"A. Grey,

Manager

"Colonel Neville, *Templeton Manor*."

Part of this letter was lithographed, including the clause that if the signature were correct, the Colonel need not reply. Captain Templar gently put this letter also into his pocket, and

carried the rest to the house, where he laid them on the hall table. Then he visited the stables, and impressed even Mr. Wain with the knowledge of horseflesh he displayed.

"Any hounds in the neighbourhood to-day?" asked Mellis of Geoffrey, who was not taking at all kindly to his breakfast, even though he had begun it with a brandy and soda.

"I don't know, I'm sure," replied Geoffrey. "We'll send for Wain, and enquire."

Mellis and Templar were very anxious for a gallop. Mrs. Flatman and Mrs. Cloynes, bright and cheery, even after the night's dissipation, were equally anxious to show themselves at the covert side. Weevil and Geoffrey were passive, and felt as if they would rather be dead than alive.

The foxhounds were wide, and it was far too late to think of joining them. But Mr. Clover's harriers would be at Abbey Farm, just off the Bancaster road, only three miles away, and they did not meet till twelve.

"Just the thing!" exclaimed Templar; "the ladies can see all the fun, and a canter with harriers will set you up, old man. Got a head on you?"

Geoffrey murmured assent. "I smoked too much last night," he said. "These cigars are awfully strong."

"So's the brandy," whispered Mr. Mellis to Mrs. Cloynes. "*I* don't mind owning up. I feel as if my head was as big as a pumpkin."

Mrs. Cloynes, a lady of attractive appearance, though supposed to be old enough to chaperone Mrs. Flatman, lifted up a small forefinger.

"You gentlemen always take more than you ought! If you go on like this, Mr. Mellis, I won't have anything more to say to you; I won't indeed."

But Mr. Mellis knew well that the fair widow—for a widow she was supposed to be—would not carry out her threat. Meanwhile Templar had taken upon himself to make the arrangements for the day, which his previous examination of the stables enabled him to do easily. Geoffrey languidly assented to the

suggestion that Mellis should ride his mare, but when asked what he proposed doing himself, he said he did not feel equal to horse exercise. In fact, in the depressed state of mind and body which follows on too many brandies and sodas over night, he feared another catastrophe in the hunting field, and had as it was to make an ass of himself before the Bankshire folks, it would be ten times worse to blunder in the presence of his lady-love.

"Well, Geoff, if you won't ride, you had better take the dog-cart," said Templar, as if he had been the master of the house. "Of course *you* will come with us, Mrs. Flatman? I know you're a rider."

"You flatter me, Captain," replied the lady, whose knowledge of the world was too superficial for her to have mastered the delicacies of addressing people by their right titles. If Templar was a Captain at all, which some persons doubted, she ought of course to have said 'Captain Templar' in speaking to him; but this is a shade of difference seldom or never acquired by people who have not been brought up among ladies and gentlemen. Geoffrey did not notice it; to Weevil of course it appeared all right, while the Etonian bit his lip, and for the first time began to suspect his schoolfellow's charming friend. He was too young and too inexperienced to know much of London and the various persons who hang on the outskirts of its society. He had put down Mrs. Flatman as a lady of a very fast set; suddenly he began to doubt whether she was a lady at all. No lady of his acquaintance would have said, "You flatter me, Captain."

She went on, after exchanging a few words in a low voice with Geoffrey:

"Thank you. I think I would rather not ride to-day. I'll make my first appearance on a Bankshire stage with foxhounds. I never cared much about harriers. It's so horrid to hear the poor hare squeak when the hounds kill her."

"Thank you, Emmeline," murmured Geoffrey, toying with a piece of toast.

"There's a pony-chaise available," remarked Templar. "It will hold four, and if the ladies like, they can take our poor friends Geoff and Weevil while Mellis and I ride."

This suited all concerned, and the orders were given. Geoffrey then turned slowly and unwillingly to his letters, which he had hitherto neglected, knowing too well that they were principally bills.

"Hallo!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Here's a fellow writes to remind me that there's a hop at the Assembly-rooms to-morrow."

"What?" asked Mrs. Cloynes.

"A hop. A subscription ball. They have written to ask me whether I will take tickets. Who's game to go?"

"Oh! what fun!" exclaimed Mrs. Flatman, clapping her hands. "Of course we will *all* go. I've brought a dress down that might do. Will they be *very* smart?"

"Pooh!" answered Geoffrey. "Just country frumps. It will be as slow as a parliamentary train, and as dull as ditch-water."

Mrs. Flatman pouted her lips in a fashion intended to be childlike. "Oh, but you will take us, won't you, Geoffrey? We shall be such a party, you know, that it won't matter whether the rest are dull or not."

Geoffrey at once felt that he *must* go. Besides, he was not unwilling to show the stupid Bankshire ladies, who snubbed him or laughed at him, that he had finer friends than they were, and could do without them.

"Well," he said, "I suppose we must go, then. How many tickets shall I ask for?"

"Oh, of course everyone will come," replied Mrs. Flatman. "You will, won't you, Captain?"

"I'm not much of a dancing man," replied Templar, "but I'll come just to keep you company. Only I must run up to town on business in the morning. Can I get back in time?"

"Of course you can, easily; the five train will bring you right for dinner," said Geoff. "You will come, Weevil?"

"Not if I know it. See you d—d first," replied that gentleman sulkily. He was disgusted at being obliged to fritter away his valuable time in Bankshire, out of deference to the superior genius of his confederate, and he felt that if he went to the ball he would be dancing on a volcano. The ladies were not particularly shocked at his language. Mrs. Cloynes merely said, 'Fie, you naughty man,' in a playful manner, while Emmeline shrugged her shoulders. Mellis was delighted to join the party, so Geoffrey was requested to write for five tickets. Breakfast over, there was a move to their dressing rooms to get ready, and Weevil followed Templar.

"What on earth do you mean by stopping on here, Templar?" asked he. "It may come out any day."

"No fear," replied Templar, "I've copped the advice note. The other is at the Colonel's club, and I'll get it on Thursday. Just look about and try to find one of his visiting tickets. That's more in your line than in mine."

"What for?" asked Weevil.

"Why, to get his letter with, you fool."

"Oh, all right. But look here. I don't feel comfortable here, not at all."

"You ought," answered Templar. "You've got the run of the cellar, and as many cigars as you like to smoke. You can drink a skinful three times a day, if you like, and play cards all night."

"That's not enough," answered Weevil.

"Well, didn't you win last night?"

"Hardly. More indifferenter pasteboard I never sat behind. Three quid was all I copped."

"Well, what more do you want? Peace of mind, eh? You'd get it if you were not so deuced fond of liquor. However, you can go your own way when you've collared your share of the swag."

"Life isn't all beer and skittles," said Weevil, solemnly. "This is a deuced ticklish business, and I tell you I don't like it."

"Then leave it alone. I can manage well enough without you," replied Templar.

"And let you sack the lot? Not likely. But I shall slope to-morrow, and wait for you at the old shop in town."

"Right you are," said Templar. "You are not exactly an ornament to a desirable country residence, anyhow. Look at your phiz in that glass! 'Pon my honour, you're a disgrace to the confederacy."

With an oath, Mr. Weevil retired from the room, too conscious of his besetting infirmity, which had more than once proved destructive to the pair's best-laid plans.

Mr. Clover was a retired draper of Bancaster, who had taken one day weekly with fox-hounds from his earliest years—first on foot, and then, when the world had treated him kindly, on the back of the nag which ran in the light van and took his parcels round to the town customers. (For those living at a distance he was humane enough to keep a stronger horse.) When he was able to dispose of his business, which he did to great advantage, just at the time that co-operative stores first threatened to reduce the profits of retail tradesmen, he bought one of the brand-new villas on the outskirts of Bancaster, and started a pack of harriers. As he had for so many years conducted the chief establishment of Bancaster—no other than the Victoria House we mentioned in our first chapter—entirely to the satisfaction of the farmers' wives, he was able to conduct his hounds entirely to the satisfaction of the farmers, who made him welcome on the east side of Bancaster whenever the fox-hounds were wide, which was too often the case to please the ardent sportsmen of that district. Mr. Clover was proud of his harriers, and accepted no subscriptions from any but landowners, thinking that tenants did enough if they allowed him to draw their mangolds and gallop over their fields. He hunted them himself with the assistance of a whip, and those who went with him were not particular as to their dress. Mr. Clover, a rubicund and portly gentleman of some sixty summers, without a trace of hair on his fat shiny face, generally turned out in a very shabby old covert coat, which was

just one degree less shabby than the tweed jacket under it. A pair of Blucher boots and velveteen breeches, and a cloth hunting cap, which might have been worn by Asheton Smith, so entirely napless was it, completed his costume. The farmers came just as it suited them, some in breeches and gaiters, some in enormous overalls, some in trousers. The few gentlemen who joined the pack—mostly young men, who were unhappy if they did not get three days a-week—never thought of wearing anything but ordinary riding clothes and a pot hat. Wherefore, Mr. Mellis created some sensation when he joined them in a field on the Abbey farm. For Mr. Mellis was a careful dresser, and having been asked down to a sporting country had provided himself with clothes for all contingencies. He wore a splendid new green coat with brass buttons, white cords, boots with mahogany tops, and a velvet hunting cap, with the proper small bow behind. Captain Templar was far more modest in his dress and deportment. He rode the Colonel's old Patrick, while Mellis had Geoffrey's Kildare. The younger men looked with some curiosity towards the lane where the Templeton pony-cart was pulled up, while its fair occupants watched the proceedings of the harriers.

Mr. Clover stared at Mr. Mellis, till his round eyes looked as if they would drop out of his head. Our friend Pebbles, the butcher, dressed in a long black frock coat and trousers of the same sable, stuffed into a pair of half-boots, recognised the Colonel's pony, and whispered to his friends that it was "the company from the Manor." But the whisper did not reach Mr. Clover, whose tongue, as the neighbours said, was about as rough as they make them. While the field were slowly following the pack, scattered over a wide plough, he kept his eyes fixed on Mr. Mellis, instead of watching his hounds, and when at last all the furrows had been drawn blank, and they had reached a tiny spinney at the end, the halt enabled him to take a more complete survey of our friend. In blissful ignorance of the excitement he had caused, young Mellis was lighting a cigar. The master rode round him deliberately, and then, approaching, asked in a deep, loud voice:

"Where did ye boy that coät, lad?"

The Etonian was nonplussed. No muscle of Mr. Clover's countenance moved. There was no suspicion of irony in his tone. The others pulled up, wondering. At last Mellis replied, hesitatingly:

"At Clarke's. Why do you ask?"

"Becas a think it's a very fine coät, and it soots a fine mun. A think ye'll show us the wä-äy?"

There was a suppressed giggle among the auditors, but even now Mellis could not make out whether he was being laughed at or not. He was however not called on to decide, as suddenly Clover put his hand up to his mouth, yelled a stentorian "Tally ho! Gone away!" and shoved his long spurs into his old horse.

"There's puss," cried one. "This way, there's a gate in that corner," said another. "A good old jack hare, to be sure,"

screamed a third; "he's making for the plantation," and it was all scurry and excitement.

Old sportsmen need not be told that it is a popular error to suppose that there is no jumping with harriers. In proportion to the distance, there is probably quite as much as with fox and stag hounds, only as hares generally run in rings, it is a very usual thing to return twice or thrice to the same field, so that gaps become easier and rails are broken down, and the right place to cross every fence is soon discovered. With the first hare of the day there is frequently enough jumping for any one. So it proved on this occasion. Mellis, glad to have a chance of showing off before the ladies, scorned the convenient gate, and boldly jumped into the lane about fifty yards in front of the pony-cart. By no means a bad rider, he soon knew that he had a good horse under him, and keeping his hands well down, did not allow Kildare to decline jumping over a nasty cress-grown ditch into the next field. Templar, on old Patrick, with Mr. Seaton Delaval and Mr. Carruthers (the only gentlemen out), took the same place in and out a little higher up, but Mr. Delaval could not refrain from pulling up. Sticking his eye-glass in his left eye, he took a squint at the ladies in the trap.

"The Sandown women!" he exclaimed under his breath. "Well, I *am* blowed. Is Clare a real bad lot or only an ass? And somehow I seem to know that chap in the dittoes. Met him in the ring I suppose!"

The harriers ran quick as lightning across two fields, and then, as is their wont, bent to the right and again to the right, carrying the scent as far as the identical lane, where they threw up. So far, Mellis had certainly had the best of it, but then there was no competition. His was the barren honour of being nearest to hounds when they checked. The master, who never jumped when he could find a gate or gap, was not up quite so quickly as Mellis thought he ought to have been, and when he *did* come, he allowed the hounds to work it out for themselves. The young men became impatient, but all had the prudence to hold their tongues except Mellis, who watched them for a few minutes,

"Mr. Pebbles was a very ardent sportsman."

looking repeatedly at Clover, as if to urge him to interfere. The master never moved, and to all appearance, was thinking of anything but the hunted hare.

"If I were you, sir," said Mellis at last, "I'd cast them over to the left. I believe the hare has gone into that stubble. They can make nothing of it themselves."

"Young mon," said Mr. Clover sternly, after staring at his interlocutor for a full half minute, "the worst hound in that pack knows a d—d sight more about hunting than you or I do, so just hold your tongue."

Mellis collapsed, without any inclination to tackle Mr. Clover again. Nor was the latter wrong, for after a few more minutes, a whimper from a liver-coloured hound, followed by a short sharp note from a black and tan puppy, called forth the exclamation—"That's right, Seaman. To her, Nancy; to her, good little puppy." And soon they were away again, over the lane, and back into the first field, where they probably changed hares, and went away a clipper after a fresh one. It was a pleasant gallop, of which the occupants of the pony-trap managed to see the best part, piloted as they were by Tommy, the tiny groom, who knew every inch of the country.

Somehow the field got separated after a while. Mellis found himself in a very big grass field, with Mr. Pebbles and a friend galloping wildly on his right. The two had attended a funeral before joining the harriers; they still wore their tall hats and their crape hat-bands, and the tails of their long single-breasted frock coats were flying out behind. Mr. Pebbles was a very ardent sportsman, and to have gone home to change might have lost him a good run. So after paying the deceased the last respects, he had hastily pushed his trousers into his half-boots, and mounted his sturdy hunter, while his friend, on a no less sturdy cob, did not mind his nether garments rucking up to his knees. Now the music of hounds sounded from a meadow just in front of them.

"Oh, Lord help us, how are we to get out of this place?" cried poor Pebbles, still galloping on, but taking a pull at his

horse. "There's no gate but what we've come in by, and hounds running like blazes."

Mellis heard and looked. In front was a flight of hurdles with another row secured to them half way up, making a very high but not a formidable jump.

"Here, you hold my horse, Jim," cried Mr. Pebbles, scarlet in the face, and flinging himself off. "I'll pull the d—d things down. Oh Lord, oh Lord, what a fool I was to come into this field! Hounds running, aren't they? Oh, the darned things won't come out!"

All this was ejaculated spasmodically as Mr. Pebbles tugged at the hurdles, which were, alas, too securely bound with withies and wire, and his face became redder and redder. Probably Mellis would have sent Kildare at the place without hesitation, if Mr. Pebbles had not, so to speak, thrown him out of his stride by his exclamation, and now he had half a mind to turn back and go boldly at them. But the last few fields were heavy going, and Kildare's sides were heaving. Just then a quiet but firm voice was heard: "Make room, gentlemen, please," followed by a sharper warning, "Stand back!" and looking round, they saw Templar coming on full of running. Unlike some Irish horses, Patrick knew what timber was, and slackening his pace as he approached it, jumped vertically up and down like a cat, without touching a stick.

"Well done," cried Mellis, while Pebbles, in his astonishment, sat down swiftly on the grass, and, by the weight of his body, unexpectedly tore the top hurdle down also. Kildare hopped over the lower one easily, but Pebbles and his friend were not even then able to compass the jump, and it was some minutes before they managed to force a passage. The hounds were now running in view, and the two just got up in time to see poor puss killed, after a few last faint attempts at turning. But, strange to say, Clover was there before them, though how he got up ever remained a mystery.

CHAPTER XXIII.

EYCES AND CREEME.

The Town Hall of Bancaster was an old-fashioned building, which had been added to from time to time as the demands on its space increased. But it was not well adapted for a ball. The only fine room was the "Court," and the apparatus required to administer justice could not be removed for so frivolous a reason as a dance. The good Bancaster folks, however, did their little best to light the dingy passages, to disguise the awkward corners, and to drape the ugly doorways. Eyces, the confectioner, knew exactly what had to be done and how to do it. It was no new thing to him, and the pink sateen strips and muslin hangings which had done duty so many times before were again in their usual places—perhaps somewhat faded and slightly crumpled, but, in the eyes of Bancaster, not to be surpassed by the art of a Nosotti or an Edgington. Composite candles were stuck about everywhere in sconces curiously wrought, of Brummagem bronze. Sofas were ingeniously constructed of two planks covered with turkey-red, attractive to the eye, but very hard to the body of the wearied dancer. At the upper end of the dancing-room the traditional trophy of flags was attached to the wall, and under it were the chairs reserved for the County people.

It must not be supposed that the report of Geoffrey's little episode with the London police had escaped the vigilant eye of Mrs. Charges, Mrs. Pebbles, and other local ladies. Mr. Tom Kirk's watchful care had, so far, succeeded in keeping the odious paragraph from Colonel Neville's knowledge; but there was no Tom Kirk at Bancaster, and what could be done without great difficulty in wild county Carbery would, in any case, have been impossible in populous Bankshire, only two hours' run from London, and in constant touch with the pulse of the great city.

So even before the arrival of Geoffrey's visitors at the Manor, folks were full of his foolish doings in town, and Mr. Seaton Delaval added to the gossip which flew from mouth to mouth by mentioning incidentally that he had met the young man at Sandown in doubtful company. Nor could the arrival of two such striking ladies as Mrs. Flatman and Mrs. Cloynes pass unnoticed. The brougham from Templeton Manor, the dog-cart, and the break used for luggage, had all come to the station to meet them, and the mere presence of such an array of carriages was enough to arouse the attention of news-loving Bancaster. "Who were these ladies?" "Who were the gentlemen with them?" were the questions debated with the greatest fervour and heat during the next twenty-four hours. At first, people were inclined to take a humane view of matters. Much is always forgiven to the young heir of a large estate; and though in his short stay in Bankshire Geoffrey had managed to get himself into several ridiculous scrapes, women have a less keen sense of humour in all matters relating to sport than men, and the fair ones of Bankshire would have forgotten to laugh at his mishaps if the police report in the London papers had not rudely reminded them that young Clare was not all that he ought to be. Even this, however, might have been put down to youthful exuberance of spirits, and so lenient are the ladies when a young man of fortune is concerned, that they were actually inclined to accept the London ladies as persons of rank and fashion, friends, perhaps, of the Colonel himself, and invited by him. But a revulsion of feeling took place, unfortunately for Geoffrey, in consequence of the rumours which reached Bancaster from the servants' hall at the Manor, though nobody came to the county town to warn the ladies; no delegate, with full powers from Mrs. Squib or Mr. File, approached the Hall Committee. But somehow the substance of the opinions of the "upper servants" at the Manor reached Mrs. Germaine's household, was carried to the ear of Dr. Charges' young man, filtered through Victoria House into the ears of Mr. Price's customers, and was even wafted through the Branscombe woods to Lady Branscombe's

respectable maid. One of the most active of Rumour's servants was no doubt young Mr. Creeme, a gentleman who, as he said, was in the habit of visiting the County families "professionally." His profession was that of hair-dresser, and on ball-days he began his tour early in the afternoon, and sped across the country from house to house in his little gig, carrying with him the instruments of his office. As Mr. Eyces had the monopoly of decorating ball-rooms, so Mr. Creeme held that of decorating ladies' heads, and it would only be a very bold or a very grand person who thought herself able to dispense with his services. Lady Branscombe, Lady Denvers, and a few others, did not want him, for they had their own maids, but the majority, and certainly nearly all the Bancaster ladies, were willing to give him their heads to work on at any time between lunch and dinner, at the cost of being compelled to sit bolt upright till it was time to go to the ball. Now Mr. Creeme had secured his enviable position almost as much by his fluent though obsequious tongue as by his skill in what he sometimes called "'igh capillary art." He was an admirable retailer of news, and news does not, like so many other commodities, suffer in the operation of retailing. On the contrary, Mr. Creeme generally managed to enrich it, to convey to his wares a new flavour, and to spice them so well that sometimes those who had told him of the occurrence would scarcely have recognised their stories. But Mr. Creeme was too clever to tell absolute untruths. If he ventured on a bit of scandal which had no foundation at all, he did so with many saving clauses, hedged very carefully. Generally, his statements were only highly-coloured reprints of current gossip. He had fondly hoped that the new arrivals from London would summon him to Templeton Manor. But as they did not, he had to obtain his information about them as best he could, and what with his small talk, that of the servants in every household, and "previous information received,' before the Bancaster town band had struck up the first bars of the opening quadrille, Mrs. Flatman, Mrs. Cloynes, and the whole party had scarcely a shred of reputation left.

It was late before the Manor people made their *entrée*. The London ladies were not, perhaps, so keen about going early and stopping late as the Bankshire folks. Their toilettes too required much time and care. Lady Denvers and her party, Lady Branscombe, young Mrs. Egerton Paull, Mrs. Germaine, and the other county people, had already occupied their chairs under the trophy of flags. The dowagers of the town were ranged, as became their station, on the hard forms on either side of the room. Number four was just over; the fiddlers were wiping their bows, and the cornet player was tuning his instrument upside down and shaking it. The gilded youths of Bancaster, somewhat flushed by the waltz, were walking round the room with their partners. There was a loud hum of talk, and a continuous rustle of tarletans, silks, and muslins.

Suddenly a dead silence fell on the crowd. The couples who had been walking round and round in approved Bancaster fashion, came to a full stop, and faced towards the door. Those who had been fighting their way into the narrow refreshment-room ceased their struggles, and the tide flowed suddenly back to the entrance. Lady Denvers put her great gold eye-glasses on her aristocratic nose, Mrs. Germaine coloured, Lady Branscombe stared, and Sir Ralph said, "Hallo! here's that young ass!" Mrs. Molesworth hastily seized Mr. Seaton Delaval's arm, and retreated to the top of the room, Mrs. Charges pulled back her lovely and inexperienced daughter to obtain a better view herself.

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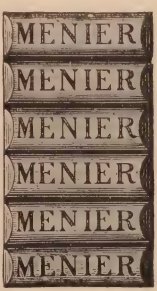

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THE COUNTRY IS SHOCKED.

Geoffrey Clare appeared at the threshold with a dazzling apparition on his arm, white neck and shoulders emerging from a gorgeous combination of blue satin and lace—emerging, perhaps, more than was necessary, certainly more than was the custom in Bankshire, where ladies were very particular not to have their dresses cut too low, and where the usually scraggy nature of the girls' necks strengthened the innate modesty of the sex. Emmeline Flatman looked very lovely, particularly to those who were sufficiently short-sighted not to see pearl powder and kohl. Her rounded shoulders were bare except for the little blue and lace strap, which did duty for a sleeve. Her fair hair was coquettishly fringed over her low forehead, the pretty turn of her neck was set off by a handsome necklace, recently purchased, and in the tender pink of her little ears sparkled the diamonds Hunt and Roskell had supplied to Geoffrey's order. In her hand she carried a bouquet of white camellias and blue forget-me-nots, ordered specially by telegraph from Covent Garden. There was a single white camellia in her hair, and a festoon of the same lovely flowers across the blue satin upper skirt. No wonder that the silence was soon broken by a buzz of envy and surprise. She made the Bancaster girls look dowdy, and even pretty Lucy Germaine, in maidenly white, with soft feathers round her neck and sleeves, could only hold her own by reason of her fresh healthy complexion, and the frank glance of her brown eyes. Geoffrey looked round proudly, and followed by Mellis, who escorted Mrs. Cloynes, walked boldly up the room towards the seats occupied by the county grandees. There was a flutter in the dovecote. Of course, if Geoffrey had been alone, or only with male friends, room would have been

made for him at once, and past follies condoned, or at any rate, not spoken of. But how could the ladies receive these women, of whom they knew nothing, except that they appeared in disgracefully low dresses, in their exclusive circle? Lady Denvers rapidly decided to ignore Geoffrey altogether. Lady Branscombe, always inclined to be haughty, had frozen into an icy stare. Mrs. Germaine, however, was painfully perplexed between her affection for Colonel Neville and her dislike of the persons with whom Geoffrey had chosen to associate. Her suffering was increased when the youth, all unconscious of the turmoil he was creating, and honestly if foolishly proud of the lovely creature on his arm, bowed, and holding out his hand, said:

"Mrs. Germaine, will you allow me to introduce my friend, Mrs. Flatman?"

The county lady blushed scarlet and inclined her head slightly. Lady Branscombe, who was sitting next to her, turned away ostentatiously, and began a lively conversation with her other neighbour. Mr. Germaine, who had been watching the scene from a little distance, stepped up quickly and touched Geoffrey's disengaged arm. The youth mistook the gesture, and at once introduced Mrs. Flatman to him also. What could a man do except bow to acknowledge the gracious smile vouchsafed to him by the London beauty? He could not jump down Geoffrey's throat by enquiring who the lady was, and what were her antecedents. While he was still standing awkwardly on one leg, not half hearing the voluble small-talk with which Mrs. Flatman at once attacked him, Geoffrey rapidly introduced Mrs. Cloynes and Mellis in succession. But Mr. Germaine began to regain his composure, and before he could bring up Templar, who not unnaturally hung back a little, as he knew more of "the ropes" than his young friend, she placed her arm in Ralph Branscombe's, and saying, "Will you take me to get a cup of tea, Sir Ralph?" swept away.

Geoffrey possessed a temperament which, as the French say, "*ne doute de rien*." He asked Mrs. Flatman whether she would occupy the chair left vacant by Mrs. Germaine, and she

accepted without demur, subsiding gracefully among the county ladies, and chatting affably with Mr. Germaine, who wished himself at the other end of the world. Lady Branscombe drew

up her skirts; and there might have been a general move if the music had not struck up at the moment. Geoffrey at once asked Mrs. Flatman to favour him with the dance, and to the great relief of the ladies, plunged into the crowd.

Now, under cover of the music, all tongues were loosened, and every dowager in the room repeated the enquiry, "Who *is* this person?"

"What audacity!" exclaimed Lady Denvers.

"The impertinence of these people is marvellous!" said Mrs. Allnutt, herself scarcely within the pale.

"It is simply disgusting to bring creatures dressed like that to a respectable ball," observed Mrs. Charges.

"I call it indecent," said Mrs. Brown.

Mr. Seaton Delaval was dragged up to Lady Denvers to tell what he knew, but he would say very little. He was too much of a gentleman to inform her what he really thought of Mrs. Flatman, but he was also too proud not to resent her being thus introduced into Bankshire society. Egerton Paull, too, was very angry, and communicated his views to other men, so that before the waltz was over, the county people, at any rate, had pretty well made up their minds that it would not do at all, and that some energetic steps must be taken. Paull volunteered to speak to Geoffrey; for as a newly-married man, he was particularly sensitive, and perhaps he was better acquainted with Mrs. Flatman's and Captain Templar's past than any of the others. But it was not easy to find an opportunity. When Geoffrey handed over his partner to Mr. Mellis, it was only to take Mrs. Cloynes instead, and at last Paull had to summon up courage to say, while that lady was still on his arm:

"Mr. Clare, I want to speak to you privately for a minute, please."

It was the same voice and the same air which had so irritated Geoffrey two months back at Monte Carlo. The same spirit of rebellion came over him, and he answered, brusquely:

"I am engaged now. You can speak to me by-and-bye."

"It is urgent, indeed. Will you escort this lady to a seat, and come outside for a minute?"

"No, I won't," replied Geoffrey, turning on his heel. "Come, Mrs. Cloynes, let us find Emmeline."

It was impossible to do more, and if the folks from the Manor had simply danced with each other, without interfering with Bankshire people, the ball might yet have gone off successfully. But it was not to be. After a couple of waltzes, both Geoffrey and Mellis wanted some stronger refreshment than the lemonade and ices supplied gratis. Soon champagne corks were flying, and the conversation in the small room grew louder and livelier, for the ladies did not disdain to dip their lips into the foaming goblets. Bancaster couples shrunk back from the refreshment

room, the ladies saying, "Oh, we cannot have an ice now; those horrid people are in there!" Mrs. Charges took counsel with some of the town ladies. Lady Denvers had no hesitation in expressing her opinion pretty clearly among her friends from the country. The men advised patience. Some of them, perhaps, thought that a waltz with that very seductive-looking woman might not be so very unpleasant; and there were a few of the Bancaster youths who admired and envied Geoffrey for his boldness and his good luck. But when, excited by wine and another waltz, he again led his partner to one of the vacant chairs at the top of the room, the county would stand it no longer. Lady Denvers rose majestically, and moved through the dancers on her son's arm, careless of interfering with the gyrations of the male and female citizens. Lady Branscombe took Mrs. Egerton Paull under her wing, and followed. Fat Mrs. Beaumont of Parboys pinched her still fatter husband, who was staring at Mrs. Flatman with round, admiring eyes, and saying, "Beaumont, send for the carriage," dragged him down the room. Mrs. Germaine closed the procession, rather unwillingly, and beckoning to Lucy, intimated that they had better go to the ladies' retiring room for a short time. Soon Mrs. Flatman and Mrs. Cloynes were the sole occupants of the chairs whilom graced by the aristocracy of Bankshire. But they did not mind this at all; they felt quite equal to their position. Egerton Paull once more approached Geoffrey, and this time dragged him almost by main force from Mrs. Flatman's chair over which he was lovingly bending.

"Mr. Clare," he said, "don't you see that everybody will go away if you persist in your conduct?"

"What conduct?" asked Geoffrey, staring round him vacantly "What do you mean?"

"You have no right to bring that woman here, nor your friend, Mr. Templar, who is no better than a card-sharper. You should take them away immediately."

"What the deuce do you mean by that language?" exclaimed

Geoffrey, flushing scarlet, while a few men joined the group to "hear the row."

"You may not be aware who Mrs. Flatman is," continued Mr. Paull; "but I may tell you that she is not fit company for our wives and sisters, and she shan't stop here!"

"Mrs. Flatman is as good as any of your stuck-up women," replied Geoffrey, hotly, "and she has a perfect right to be here. No fellow shall interfere with me. I've paid for my tickets, and *my* friends are fit company for anybody."

"I am obliged to differ with you, Mr. Clare," said Mr. Molesworth, quietly. "Will you withdraw with your party?"

"Certainly not. See you d—d first," answered Geoffrey, getting more and more angry.

"Not even," interrupted Mr. Egerton Paull, "if I assure you, on my word of honour, that . . . "—and here he lowered his voice to a whisper.

Geoffrey jumped back a yard. "It's an infernal lie!" he cried out.

Egerton Paull now lost his temper. "Stupid ass," he said; "anyone but a fool like you would have found it out ages ago. She is known all over London."

Molesworth shrugged his shoulders. "Come away," he said to his friends. "We cannot turn the women out by main force, so all we can do is to go ourselves."

And they went, with all the county ladies. Mrs. Charges and some of the best townspeople followed their example; but many remained who did not mind what company they danced in so long as the music and the floor were good. They would not abandon the supper, for which they had paid beforehand, for a mere question of etiquette. Geoffrey endeavoured to conceal what had passed; but of course Mrs. Flatman was not long in finding it out and assuring him that what he had heard was a dreadful falsehood. Need it be said that he fully believed her, and that though Templar had prudently retired, the rest of the party enjoyed themselves very well till the small hours of the morning.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BOTTOM OF THE OOZE.

"THE GOVERNOR wants to keep the grey to himself," said Geoffrey.

"But he won't know anything about it, old man, and I'm off to-morrow, anyhow. I'd dearly like a gallop on the grey," replied Templar.

"Well, *I* don't mind, but he might kick up a devil of a dust."

"Pooh, pooh, not if he hears who it was that rode him. I'll take very good care of him, you may be sure."

"Indeed, I hope you will. Well, then, have your own way," answered Geoffrey at last.

This conversation took place on the morning following the Bancaster ball. The hounds were advertised for twelve o'clock on purpose to suit the convenience of late risers, and as they were to meet just outside the town, no one could have an excuse for stopping away.

Mrs. Flatman was anxious to show off her new habit, so however unwillingly, Geoffrey was obliged to ride. As there were not hunters enough for the whole party (even though the Colonel's grey was pulled out), Mr. Mellis was consigned to the pony cart, to escort Mrs. Cloynes. But Mr. Mellis was no longer the same ardent youth as before, now his admiration for Mrs. Cloynes had cooled down. Less infatuated than Geoffrey, he had been

far more affected by the scene of the previous night than that ingenuous youth. Blessed with a certain reserve fund of common sense, which though not often to the front, was occasionally forced out of him by events, Mr. Mellis shrewdly concluded that the County people must have had some better reason for leaving the ball-room than mere conceit and 'uppishness.' He had been very uncomfortable since, and had almost lost his sleep in consequence of his deep and unusual cogitations. What would his own governor say if he heard of his being seen driving about Bankshire with an objectionable person, after dancing half the night with the same objectionable lady? All the fat would be in the fire, and Mellis had had too many rows with his father to yearn for another.

It was certainly very jolly at the Hall. There could be no mistake about that. Mrs. Cloynes was very kind indeed—most kind; there was lots to eat and drink, you could smoke all over the house, and Geoffrey was always ready for billiards and loo. That objectionable Weevil, too, had gone. But might not these pleasures be purchased at too high a price? While thus deliberating, Mellis, like most weak creatures, found himself too deeply involved to retreat. He was bound to make at least one more appearance on the Bankshire stage. He promised himself that it should be his final one.

"I'll show them how little I care for their beastly pride," said Geoffrey, as he settled himself in the saddle. "The way these people behave is simply snobbish."

"It was very unkind to poor me," said Mrs. Flatman, plaintively. She looked most attractive in her habit. It fitted her graceful figure like a glove, and she sat on Kildare as if she had done nothing but ride all her life.

"They are disgusting," Geoffrey went on, "the slowest, stupidest set I ever came across. Even Mrs. Germaine is no better than the rest with her silly nonsense. I'll snap my fingers at the whole lot of them."

"Let me go away, Geoffrey," murmured Mrs. Flatman. "I shall get you into trouble by being here, and I'm sure Flatman

will be getting vexed too. It would be better not to go to the hounds. Let us turn back at once."

"Not for the world, darling!" exclaimed he. "Do you think I would give *you* up for a parcel of country bumpkins. Lord! the way you cantered in last night was a treat to see! Put them out of conceit altogether with themselves; I believe jealousy was at the bottom of it."

"I am afraid we women *are* jealous," said Mrs. Flatman. "But, Geoffrey dear, you know I *must* go home to-morrow, anyhow. I promised I would. There would be a row at home if I did not. It might all come out, you see."

"All right. I'll take you up to town to-morrow, and try and get some dibs out of Flat. Ha ha!" laughed Geoffrey; "it's rather a strong order, ain't it, to borrow money from a fellow and make love to his wife too?"

"You Don Juan," said Mrs. Flatman, playfully tapping him with her hunting crop, "you should not laugh at your victims."

Thus beguiling the way with pleasant and intellectual converse, they soon reached the meet, where the assemblage was unusually large. The season was drawing to its close, so riding men wanted to make the most of it. The weather was fine, and the ladies were glad to come out and breathe the soft spring wind. The trysting place was near the town, and everyone had a chance of appearing out without having to get up early, and without losing the whole day. There was, of course, Sir Ralph, surrounded by his pack, and talking with Lord Denvers on the prospects of the coming elections; there was Lady Branscombe in her phaeton, with Mrs. Egerton Paull by her side; Mr. Paull on his handsome, well-mannered bay, attentive and careful, as beseems a newly-married man; fat Mr. Beaumont of Parboys, on a heavy weight-carrier, known for the last quarter of a century in the Bankshire country; Mr. Pebbles, who had, to-day, *not* been to a funeral; Mr. Clover, in his old cloth cap and seedy covert coat; Dr. Charges neatly got up, but in so sober a style that no one would have thought the costume unbecoming for a

sick room, on a well-bred but ill-tempered iron-grey; Seaton Delaval, as usual, on a great raking horse of blood and speed; two of the officers in charge of the depôt at Bancaster, well mounted and still better dressed; Lucy Germaine on Pippin, and her father on his quiet bay; in short, the whole country side. Enter to all those people, who knew each other's affairs by heart, and who everybody's grandfather and grandmother were, a trio so ill assorted as Captain Templar, Geoffrey, and Mrs. Flatman. Geoffrey thought it wise to assume a haughty look of superciliousness; Mrs. Flatman was divinely unconscious, or pretended to be, either of the cold looks of the ladies or of the astonishment and admiration of the men.

Lady Branscombe asked Egerton Paull to summon Sir Ralph. The master at once approached.

"Is it not high time to move on, Ralph?" she asked. "You must be all getting dreadfully cold standing about."

"We generally give them a little law on the morning after a ball, Di. However, it's twenty past, so come away my beauties, come away, come, come, come away!"

Like so many 'ladies' days' in warm spring weather, this one looked at first as if it were to be an entire blank. Cover after cover was drawn without a whimper. In the long row of horsemen and carriages which followed along the lanes and by-roads, there was much gossip about the events of the previous night, but none of the pleasurable excitement of watching the chase, even from a distance. It was long past one o'clock before Daffodil, away in some thick gorse, at last raised her treble, and told that a fox had been seen that way. Faint and catchy was the scent on the dry ground; where the sweet spring grass was sprouting in the meadows, the hounds at last spoke cordially and in unison, but their chorus died away again almost as soon as it was heard. It was a day to try the patience of even experienced sportsmen, therefore no wonder that the huge crowd, consisting largely of simple pleasure seekers, was difficult to control, pressed unduly on hounds, and when reproved became sulky. At last, however, a few small fences reduced the field by a number of

amateurs, and most of the carriage folk, having had a pleasant drive, and seeing little chance of witnessing a steeplechase, turned for home. Then gradually, though slowly, the hounds worked up closer to their fox. In the moist shadow of the hedgerows they would run merrily, and over the deep ridge and furrow of the Bancaster pastures; but then again, a parched hilltop, or a dry plough, would make Sir Ralph and the huntsmen shout once more: "Hold hard, gentlemen, please! give the hounds a chance."

This was a sort of run which Geoffrey liked. He could enjoy a canter across a grass field as well as any one, so long as he had plenty of time to pick a convenient gap in the far fence; and the long checks were well adapted for exchanging sweet nothings with his charmer. Miss Germaine and Mrs. Flatman were now the only ladies who still persevered, Lucy riding wide on the right with her father, while Geoffrey and his fair friend were close to the stern hounds.

The sun was declining towards the west, but still the pack held on, cheered by an occasional whiff of stronger scent, aided, when quite at fault, by a judicious cast. There was a wily fox in front of them, and a traveller, but not a straight one. They had already covered several miles in a great circle, and Sir Ralph more than once expressed his opinion that the fox was bound for Templeton Woods. For the first time he addressed Geoffrey.

"Are your earths closed, Mr. Clare?" he asked. "I sent word yesterday."

"Earths?" repeated Geoffrey.

"Yes, the fox-earths near the gravel pit. You know them, of course?"

"I don't quite remember," stammered Geoffrey. "I don't quite know."

Sir Ralph shrugged his shoulders and turned away impatiently. Seaton Delaval laughed, and said audibly: "Tell him to go and sit upon them, Sir Ralph." Geoffrey looked blankly at Mrs. Flatman, and enquired what 'on earth' they meant. He did not know that foxes generally live underground, and take refuge in a hole when hard-pressed. How should he?

However, the master's fears were not destined to be realised. Headed by a team ploughing, Reynard made a sharp turn to the right, and as the power of the sun diminished, the pack got on better terms. When they trod the soft turf below Wrottesmoor, on the north side of the hill, they suddenly burst into loud music and then, like a flock of pigeons, flew away across the greensward. Now the chase began in earnest, and those who had persevered so long were rewarded. Mrs. Flatman forgot all about Geoffrey and everything else, as she sat down in her saddle and put Kildare's head straight for the first big fence, which bordered the downlands on the north. Instinctively she had picked out her pilot—Mr. Seaton Delaval—and judiciously rode about six lengths behind him, but not exactly in his wake. One 'stake-and-bound' after another was thrown behind them, as hounds ran fast, pointing now for Warborough and its vale; brought to their noses when they crossed a bit of plough, but still holding on, in order to fly once more over the next grassfield. Well in the first flight rode the master, Mr. Carruthers, and Mr. Seaton Delaval; on the extreme left Templar was stealing away on the Colonel's grey, taking the fences in his stride; Mrs. Flatman, Mr. Egerton Paull, and a few more were well up. Miss Germaine, sorely against her will, was riding with her father in the second division, cutting off corners and popping through gates; far astern, even in the rear of Mr. Pebbles, Geoffrey was plodding away, baulking his fences, blundering at the gaps, trying clumsily to open gates which, when he had passed through, he always let fly against the knees of the unfortunate man who happened to be behind him. When they had sunk the last hill which separated them from the Vale, and Geoffrey had quite lost sight of Emmeline Flatman, he pulled up out of breath. Only by a succession of happy accidents and lucky scrambles back into the saddle had he, so far, succeeded in avoiding a fall. But he felt his knees trembling, and his arms ache, and his heart sink within him as he saw the last red coat disappear over a post and rails.

"Hang it! this ain't good enough," he said, giving his mare

a violent jerk, for she was keen at following hounds and did not mind the rails at all. "I don't know one bit where I am, but here's a road that is bound to lead somewhere, so I'll just ride down it quietly. No doubt the hounds will very soon stop."

But they did not. The fox, who had been out on his travels, was now homeward bound, and his home was in Winterton Hangings, the steep gravelly hill, on the far side of the Ooze river. In and out of the London road the hounds swarmed, the clean stake-and-bound hedge on either side not stopping the hard riders for a moment, while the second division managed to cross the macadam by a couple of convenient gates. Now there could be no doubt of his point, for unless he turned short back there was no cover nearer than the Hangings. As they sped across the wide meadows which slope gradually towards the river, and become damper as its bank is approached, the afternoon sun shone brightly in their faces, dazzling the eyes and making it difficult to pick the best place to jump the nasty deep ditches which intersect this part of the country. Just under the sun, not more than a mile off, were the black woods of Winterton—would the fox reach this stronghold before the hounds, or would they beat him? On the right the spire of Bancaster Priory sparkled in the sunlight. Far away to the south they could see the Ooze winding through the green meadows, and now they were approaching its banks and galloping over those sedgy pastures which are flooded whenever it is wet, and where the deep clay, poached by cattle, forms dangerous holes and hard ruts in dry weather. Seaton Delaval, the huntsman, and the redoubtable grey were now leading; their horses doing just about all they could. There was no danger of over-riding hounds. When the leaders—Foxglove and Warlike—plunged into the dark Ooze the best of the men were a field behind, putting their horses straight at a nasty ditch faced by a post and rails. The three rode at it abreast. No! there were four! A good-looking, soldierlike man, with a small brown moustache, on a big black horse, had suddenly joined the front rank, as if he had dropped from the clouds. He was not dressed like the others, in full hunting costume; but wore only a suit of tweed and gaiters.

Yet though his dress might not be distinguished, there was no mistaking the gentleman. Nor the rider either, for boldly though all went at the big jump in front of them, there was for the spectator something distinctly workmanlike in the way this new comer stuck his knees into the horse, tightened the snaffle-rein, and gently touched the black's flanks. There was a heavy crash of timber as Delaval's thoroughbred chested the rails, and with a scramble, fell back on the wrong side. But it did not disturb the black, who bounded over the rails and ditch like a deer, while his rider did not move in the saddle. Templar got over well on the grey; Delaval picked himself up and drew his horse aside to let Sir Ralph and Mrs. Flatman take advantage of the opening he had made; but before they had jumped the ditch hounds were running in view across the grass on the far side of the river.

"Is this fordable?" said Templar hastily to the man on the black, the only one near him.

"No. You must jump it," replied the man, curtly.

"No horse in England can," answered Templar.

"Oh yes. That grey will."

"How the devil do *you* know?"

"Better than you, anyhow. Now for it." And with these words the man in the tweeds gave his horse a cut with a little stick he carried, dug the spurs into him, and rode hard at the forbidding water, flowing, black and turgid, between sedgy banks.

"Hold u-up," cried he, as the horse bounded into the air, and the next moment the Ooze was behind them, and the man in tweeds was riding alone with the hounds. For Templar had either not chosen so good a place, or had ridden with only half a heart. Perhaps both. At any rate the grey jumped short, Templar slid over his side into the water, and the horse, relieved of his rider's weight, scrambled out on the bank, shook himself, and galloped after the fast retreating black. The huntsman, Delaval, Sir Ralph, and Mrs. Flatman, managed to get across the river lower down by a ford, but though they galloped their best they were not able to reach hounds till they had pulled down their fox, and the man in tweeds was laying

"Give me my horse?"

about him vigorously with his stick, so as to render the gallant quarry the last honours. He willingly surrendered this function to the huntsman, who touched his cap respectfully as he took the fox from him, and all except the lady jumped off their wearied horses. Then Captain Templar appeared, bedraggled and wretched, limping across the grass. The man in tweeds had caught the grey, and the two horses were amicably rubbing noses.

"Give me my horse!" said Templar roughly.

"Not quite so fast, my friend," replied the man. "What is your name?"

"What the d—l does that matter to you?" exclaimed Templar. "I'm not asking for yours. Give me my horse, do you hear?"

"I am Colonel Neville, and I live at Templeton Manor," said the man in tweeds, "and that's my grey you rode so badly at the river. Now, sir, what have you got to say?"

For once in his life, Templar was taken aback. After some hesitation he answered:

"I am stopping with Mr. Clare at the Manor. My name is Templar."

"Oh! *Captain* Templar, I presume?" said the Colonel, sarcastically.

"Precisely so," replied Templar, recovering himself.

"What regiment, may I ask?" continued the Colonel.

"Well, it don't seem quite the thing to cross-examine a man about his name and regiment and all that when he's wet through," said Templar almost facetiously. "Is it, gentlemen?"

With these words he turned round to Sir Ralph, Seaton Delaval, and Mr. Egerton Paull, who had by this time come up. In the distance he might, if he had looked in that direction, seen a lady cantering away towards Doncaster. Mrs. Flatman had discreetly made herself scarce when she discovered the man in tweeds, nor did she wait for the brush she had so well deserved.

"Do you know this gentleman, Sir Ralph?" asked Colonel Neville. "Do *you* know him, Paull?"

"I am sorry to say I do," replied he. "I know him as a gambler and a defaulter on the turf."

"What Egerton Paull states is quite true," Mr. Seaton Delaval said. "He can't go into the ring; he has been turned out of several clubs, and he is notorious in town and on the Continent. I believe he never was in the army at all."

"I have warned Mr. Clare against him several times," said Paull. "I saw his friend—a drunken creature named Weevil—distinctly cheating Mr. Clare at Monte Carlo."

"It's a d—d lie!" exclaimed Templar.

"I am afraid, Mr. Templar," said Colonel Neville, quietly, "that the evidence against you is overwhelming. These gentlemen can have no earthly object in taking away your character; and I have other reasons, equally good, for believing what they say."

"Well, you can't keep me all day here. Let me get my horse back and I'll go to the Manor and relieve you of my company as soon as I can change my clothes."

"Not so, Mr. Templar. You are a gentleman to whom I would not trust the worst horse I ever rode, far less the best. You will please to walk into Bancaster; it is only a mile and a half. There you will wait at the Denvers' Arms till I send you your clothes from the Hall."

"I won't stand being treated like this!" exclaimed Templar, hotly.

"Then don't," said the Colonel, and jumping on the black, he threw the grey's snaffle-rein over the horse's head and took it into his hand. "Are you ready, Sir Ralph?"

The huntsman, having secured the mask and fastened the brush to the Colonel's saddle, blew his horn, and the five men rode off towards Bancaster. The Colonel turned round to Templar, who was standing, dripping and desperate, in the middle of the field, and cried out:

"Get over that stile in the corner, follow the footpath to the road, and then keep to the left. *Good* morning."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE COLONEL AT HOME.

On the ride home, Colonel Neville heard all he wanted, and more than he liked to hear, of the character of his ward's guests at the Manor. Sorrow was, of course, the chief feeling which swayed him—sorrow that Geoffrey should have allowed himself to be befooled and perhaps robbed (he little knew to what extent) by a gang of adventurers. He was not angry with the young man—how could he be? He was only deeply disappointed and grieved. He had started by the mail as soon as he had received the anonymous letter, which by itself would probably have been insufficient to move him, but which was corroborated by a note from Mrs. Germaine, in which that lady begged him to return as soon as he could make it convenient, as she thought that Geoffrey required his advice. Mrs. Germaine's letter stated nothing more, and, if quite alone, would not have alarmed him. But in connection with the other, and with an extract from a Society paper, which was sent him by a kind friend, and in which Geoffrey's escapade with the police was treated with scathing sarcasm, the reasons for an immediate return were ample. Leaving Tom Kirk to look after matters in his absence, he travelled as fast as possible to Dublin, and caught the night mail to London. He arrived at Templeton Manor soon after our friends had started to meet the hounds, and after a short interview with Mr. File, and a brief inspection of the stables, ordered out the only hunter fit to go—old Patrick—and determined to find Geoffrey as soon as he could. It was no easy task to come up with hounds, as though the fox had not gone fast, he had kept moving, and more than once Neville was deceived by his very knowledge of the country, which induced him to ride to distant points he thought probable rather than follow the chase

in its devious course. At last, however, when near the London Road, he heard the horn, and joined in the two miles which ended in the death of the fox.

Meanwhile, at the Manor, things were what is popularly termed at sixes and sevens. Mr. File was, indeed, triumphant, but he reflected with pain that his triumph might cost him several good tips. For when Mr. Mellis returned with Mrs. Cloynes, and heard of Colonel Neville's arrival, that lady at once exercised the wisest discretion. She disappeared immediately, and with her maid began to pack. They wrought so hard, that very soon all the trunks were ready for a start the moment Mrs. Flatman should come in. Mellis, being a gentleman, did not see why the return of the master of the house should upset everything, and calmly waited for Geoffrey, who turned up towards three o'clock, in the frame of mind and body most usual to him after being thrown out or thrown off. One of the two, sometimes both, had occurred to him, so far, on every hunting day, and his affection for the sport did not sensibly increase as time wore on. He always returned hungry, tired, muddy, cold, and disgusted, and to-day he was as dirty, as hungry, and as disgusted as ever. When he rode into the stable-yard Mellis was smoking a cigarette under the sunny porch of the saddle-room.

"Any sport?" he asked.

"Oh! as usual," replied Geoffrey, giving the poor mare a vicious kick as he got off. "I went to the right, and the d—d hounds to the left, and so I lost 'em. I'm deuced hungry and regularly done up."

"Where is Mrs. Flatman?"

"Gone on with them, I suppose. She rides splendidly, don't she?"

"Yes," answered Mellis, "she rides very well. By-the-bye, your governor has come home." This was spoken as if it were quite an ordinary piece of news, not at all calculated to surprise, still less to frighten, any one.

"My governor!" exclaimed Geoffrey, suddenly turning pale, and standing still in astonishment.

"Yes, Colonel Neville. He turned up while we were out, it seems, and he has gone after the hounds now."

"The devil!" was all Geoffrey could say.

"What's the matter, old man?" asked Mellis, quite concerned. "You look altogether upset. I thought the governor was a rare good old boy."

"So—he—is," stammered the youth; "but—well, you know, Mellis, he might not quite like all the people we have here."

"Meaning me? spit it out, old chappie, don't be afraid!" exclaimed Mellis. "Though why you should fancy he should object to me, I don't know. You ought not to have asked me down if you thought so. I didn't press for an invite; and now I'll just make tracks."

"My dear fellow, you are quite wrong!" exclaimed Geoffrey, eagerly. "Of course he will be delighted to make *your* acquaintance; I was not meaning you, I was not indeed. But what the deuce am I to do!" he exclaimed, as he walked slowly towards the house.

"Do? Why, what is there to do?" said Mellis, now sympathizingly, seeing that Geoffrey was sorely distressed.

"My dear fellow," answered he, "you don't know, you don't understand."

"How can I, if you don't tell me? We have been having a rare good time in the old chap's house, lots to eat and drink and smoke, plenty of horses, and all that; but you have only asked your own friends, and unless there is something wrong about the ladies——"

"I don't believe a word of it," fell in Geoffrey, hotly.

"Then there *is* something wrong?"

"Oh! they talk a lot, but it is not true."

"Whe—w—," whistled Mellis, "they talk a lot, do they? I thought as much, last night. If *that's* the case, you are in a nice mess, certainly."

"You'll stand by me, won't you, old chappie?" asked Geoffrey, plaintively.

"Come and eat your lunch, and tell me all about it."

Geoffrey did not tell all, but he told enough of his financial transactions with Mr. Flatman to make Mellis assume a serious air. The upshot of it was, however, that the Etonian gave him excellent advice. "Make a clean breast of it, Clare, it's the safest game." The young man had a very decided mistrust of Templar, but saw that it was quite impossible to shake Geoffrey's confidence in that person, particularly as he had no positive facts to adduce in favour of his suspicions. Although Geoffrey did not actually promise to adopt Mellis's suggestions, he felt somewhat more hopeful and confident. A clatter of hoofs roused them from their conversation, and they came out of the dining-room in time to meet Mrs. Flatman in the hall.

"Don't keep me, Geoffrey. I can't stop to talk," she said, shortly, and ran upstairs at once.

"Have some lunch, Mrs. Flatman," Mellis called after her. But she did not hear, or did not choose to answer.

The two youths looked at each other. "I suppose she's seen the governor," said Geoffrey.

"And he's given her a bit of his mind," added Mellis.

"No! you don't know him. He could not be rude to a woman if he tried. But something has upset her."

"Perhaps her horse!"

"Perhaps so," assented Geoffrey. But at that moment a fly drew up at the door. There was no one in it. The driver told them that he had been ordered to fetch some ladies and their luggage from the Manor.

"Bolting, by Jove!" exclaimed Mellis.

"The deuce they are! I must stop that," cried Geoffrey, and he, too, made a rush upstairs. He was not admitted, however. All he could get through the closed door was a request to send up the men to fetch the boxes down, and he was obliged to comply.

The next person who arrived at the Manor was no other than its owner. The front door was blocked by one of those huge 'American' trunks which ladies have now almost universally adopted, and Colonel Neville stopped to survey the scene.

Geoffrey's face, pale and anxious, was visible behind the two men who were carrying the great box through the porch.

"How are you, Geoffrey?" said the Colonel at last, stepping round the box. "Had a fall, I see?" this in allusion to Geoffrey's muddy garments. "You're not hurt, I hope?"

"Not at all, thank you, sir," answered the youth.

"Are your friends going away?"

"Yes, sir."

"To whom does this trunk belong?" asked the Colonel.

"To Mrs. Flatman and Mrs. Cloynes, sir. They have been stopping here."

"Ladies!" exclaimed the Colonel. "My dear Geoffrey, I am ashamed of you."

"How, sir?" stammered Geoffrey, thinking the storm was about to burst.

"My dear boy, two *ladies* (he emphasized the term) who are leaving Templeton Manor, should not have to send for a fly, nor have any difficulties about luggage. File!"

"Yes, Colonel," answered that excellent butler.

"See whether there is a horse fit to put in the brougham, and if so, order it round at once. Send some one to get a cart from the home farm for the ladies' luggage."

Geoffrey breathed again. The driver, who had heard the orders, said civilly enough to the Colonel: "Then I suppose I can go home, sir?"

"Not yet. I have a job for you. Which of you men," asked the Colonel, "attended to *Captain* Templar?"

"I did, sir," said John, stepping forward.

"Very well. Go and pack up all his things. Clear up the room entirely, and put everything in this fly. The man will take them to the Denvers Arms. *Captain* Templar is not able to return to the Hall to-night."

These orders, given with military promptitude and decision, astonished Geoffrey, but he was relieved to see on his guardian's quiet and serious face no trace of anger.

"Is there any lunch on the table?" asked the Colonel, glancing

sharply at Mellis, and then adding, "introduce me to your friend, Geoff."

The youth went through the form, while Mellis blushed, but said to himself, "Not half a bad sort." He did not wish to accompany guardian and ward into the dining-room, but Geoffrey whispered: "Come on, old man," and he was obliged to follow. The Colonel pretended to be quite unconscious of anything having gone wrong, and in five minutes Mellis felt himself quite at his ease, and was amusing his host with an account of their day with the harriers. Before the late lunch was over, the brougham came round to the door, and the Colonel said:

"Let us see your friends off, Geoffrey."

In the hall were Mrs. Flatman and Mrs. Cloynes cloaked for the journey. The former had her veil down, and a remarkably thick one it was. She bowed silently when Geoffrey introduced his guardian to her. Neville looked at her scrutinizingly, but it was difficult to make out her features. He wanted her to raise her veil—and how should he make her do it? He said that he hoped her stay at the Hall had been pleasant. She bowed. Then he asked whether she proposed going up to town by the five o'clock train? She only murmured an indistinct assent, and was evidently determined neither to show her face nor to allow her voice to be heard. Still the Colonel was convinced that he had seen her before, had known her under different circumstances at some time long past. He had handed both ladies into the carriage before it flashed across him where and when. He put his head in at the window.

"Good-bye, Miss Dacres," he said, in a low but distinct whisper. There was a sharp exclamation of surprise, and the brougham rolled off.

Mellis had taken advantage of the departure to slip away. Geoffrey was standing in the hall alone.

"Good heavens, Geoff.," said the Colonel, placing his arm within the young man's, "into what hands have you fallen? Come into the library."

CHAPTER XXVII.

NOT HALF A BAD SORT.

The conference in the Colonel's sanctum was long and painful. Neville suffered little short of agony during the interview. To find that the youth, on whom he had built such hopes, should at the very threshold of life have fallen into bad company, was sad enough. But it was still more distressing to the gallant soldier to see that Geoffrey was not telling the whole truth, and to find that the story of his follies had to be wormed out of him by a steady and persistent cross-examination. It was to the credit of Geoffrey's heart rather than his head that he stood up gallantly for Templar, maintaining stoutly that that gentleman had kept him out of still more scrapes.

"My dear Geoff.," said the Colonel, after he had reached, as he thought, the bottom of it, "are you really so foolish as to consider your own judgment infallible? Can you not believe the testimony which we have from so many sides, to the effect that your friend Templar is nothing but a sharper of the worst and most dangerous description."

"I take a man as I find him," answered Geoffrey, firmly, "and Templar has done me no end of good turns."

"How much money have you lent him?"

"Very little. Far less than he prevented me losing."

"Who introduced you to Flatman, the money lender?"

"Weevil, the other fellow," answered Geoffrey. "I must admit I never cared much about him."

"Who advised you to back the wrong horse at Sandown?"

"Weevil," said Geoffrey again. "But Templar said it was no certainty."

"Who invited you to dinner at the club, the night you lost so much money at billiards, and got into that disgraceful row?"

"Templar. But he advised me not to bet, and he was not in the row at all himself. He thought we had gone home."

"No doubt, no doubt," said the Colonel. "It was not his game to get you into that sort of scrape. But, Geoffrey, can't you see that Weevil and Templar and that money-lending fellow are all in the same boat, and the lady too?"

"Colonel Neville!" exclaimed Geoffrey hotly, flushing scarlet to the roots of his hair, "you are my guardian, and you have been very good to me. But that is no reason why you should insult a lady whom I both respect and admire."

"Sit down, Geoff., dear," replied the Colonel, "and don't get angry. I don't mind your standing up for her. As far as you know you are quite right to do so." And really the gallant soldier was quite delighted that his foolish ward had enough manliness left to defend both his friend and his lady-love.

"Then, why do you say such things, sir? A fellow can't stand them. I've been a fool, I know, and I've wasted a lot of money, and got beastly drunk, but I can't listen to Mrs. Flatman being abused."

"Geoffrey," said the Colonel, "come to the window. Look into my face. Do you think I could tell a lie? Do you think I would tell *you* a lie, you who are all but a son to me?"

Geoffrey looked into the Colonel's face. Those quiet, frank eyes were gazing at him so honestly, so sadly, and yet so lovingly, that his own fell before them.

"No. I am sure you would not, sir," he stammered.

"Well, then, my boy," the Colonel went on, speaking very slowly and distinctly. "Listen. I cannot help hurting your feelings. It is a surgical operation, but you are young and you can bear it. Mrs. Flatman is a lady whose past will not bear investigation. As Miss Dacres she was well known in London when I was last over on leave. How she lived it is not for me to say. But it is a matter of notoriety that she acted as decoy to a private gambling-house, where *baccarat* was played for large sums, and more than one young fellow was ruined."

"It cannot be the same person!" exclaimed Geoffrey.

"It *is* the same person. Sir Ralph Branscombe suspected it,

Seaton Delaval knows it, though he would not tell me. *I* am sure of it." The Colonel added various details on the subject of Emmeline's life which it is not necessary to repeat, as they have nothing further to do with this story. They were, however, so complete and so convincing that even Geoffrey could no longer doubt their accuracy.

"Now," he said at last, "do you understand why they cut you at their ball yesterday? Do you see what a scandal it is to have such a person as Mrs. Flatman down here, in the house where my mother and my father lived?"

Geoffrey was silent.

"Not all this," continued the Colonel, "is your fault, Geoffrey. I do not blame you for being taken in by a clever woman like Mrs. Flatman or Miss Dacres, whatever her real name may be. You were of course wrong and weak in allowing yourself to be carried into such a flirtation, but in this respect you only share the folly inseparable from youth, and I think you'll get over that. But the real truth is, Geoff., that one great fault has created all these troubles. Shall I tell it you?"

"If you please, sir," replied Geoffrey, humbly.

"You think too much of yourself. That's all. You think you know more than other people, and you know," said the Colonel, laughing, "even if you were a real prodigy, you could not have as much knowledge of the world at twenty as men have at forty. Could you now? Be honest."

"I suppose not," answered Geoffrey.

"Well you see, my dear boy, it's this conceit that has led you astray. It is this which has made you fancy that you could steer clear between all these rocks. Templar and his friends have fooled your vanity to the top of its bent, and you have swallowed their flattery like milk. I'm very disagreeable, am I not?"

What could Geoffrey say? It certainly was not pleasant to be told home truths, but all this time the Colonel's manner was so thoroughly kind and gentle, and so entirely different from the stern or irate father of story-books, that he felt sincerely grieved for his follies rather than angry for being told of them.

Colonel Neville proceeded: "I can quite believe, Geoffrey, that you will be very glad to get out of the room, and to have all this over. So shall I be. But let's make a good job of it while we are at it. To return to your chief fault. You fancy you can ride, and between you and me, Geoffrey, you know you can't yet, nor could any body expect it of you. But you should not pretend, my boy; it only gets you into scrapes. You know nothing of farming and hunting—and I am not surprised—but you should watch and learn, instead of putting your foot into it by making mistakes. You cannot stand much wine without losing your head; but you have taken more than you ought because other fellows drank a lot, and you fancied you could also do it with impunity. And, most serious of all, you have had such confidence in your own judgment and your ability to pull through that you would not trust *me*, though I believe I am your best friend. Now, Geoffrey, just sit down here and let us see what all these bills of yours come to."

The youth obeyed.

"First of all, can I believe you, Geoffrey? I beg you solemnly to tell me all and everything now. Let us have it over, and do not keep back the smallest debt."

"I will tell you everything, sir."

"Do, I beg you. I'm not the heavy father. I sha'n't eat you, even if the figure is, as I fear, very high. Now go ahead."

The total was certainly an appalling one, when Mr. Flatman's recent advances were added to the bills incurred for Mrs. Flatman. Geoffrey could not, in most cases, give the exact figure.

"Now," said Neville, "as I can't get this money from your property, I must find it myself. I'll get Leader and Wyllie, my solicitors, to settle these. They will, I dare say, obtain some reductions. Don't you bother any more about them. But, Geoffrey, don't do it again. For Heaven's sake, come and tell me when you want money, and don't put your name to paper. Now shake hands, my boy, and let's go and dress. We will see to-morrow what we'd better do to get over the last night's business at the ball."

Geoffrey grasped the Colonel's hand, but could not refrain from bursting into tears. That his guardian should thus close the interview without a word of reproach, with as much cordiality as if he had conducted himself irreproachably, and with as great a show of confidence as if he had never misused it, touched him

to the heart. The events of the day, particularly the horrible revelations about Mrs. Flatman, had unnerved him.

"Go upstairs, dear boy," said the Colonel, kindly. "I'll see you to your room. Don't fancy that your life is ruined. You will do better in future, I know. Everything will be right to-morrow."

Sunday morning brought an unusually heavy post. There was a letter from the Colonel's bankers which made him drop his tea-spoon in amazement. It was dated Saturday, and merely stated that as no reply had been received to previous communications, the bank had that morning discounted his acceptance for £8,700 in favour of Mr. Weevil. Neville read the letter through twice, and then looked at Geoffrey. The youth was eating a hearty breakfast and chatting merrily with Mellis. Surely *he* could know nothing about this huge swindle, for of course it was nothing else but a swindle. Yet Geoffrey had deceived him so wofully that perhaps he was also guilty of this —the greatest deceit of all; nothing less than a forgery. No! It was quite impossible. It could not be; and the Colonel was ashamed of suspecting him. But something must be done at once. The sum was a far greater one than Neville could afford to lose, and every endeavour must be made to save it, if it was not already too late. Unfortunately it was Sunday. There would be no train to town until the afternoon, and in London everything would be closed, and no one to be found. So after much thought, the Colonel decided to go up by the evening mail, so as to be at the bank the moment the doors opened.

Later in the day he told Geoffrey that he was obliged to go to town on urgent business, and that he required his presence. He suggested that Mellis should ride one of the horses to hounds on the Monday, while they were away, and the young man agreed willingly. Geoffrey assumed that he was wanted to show the lawyers an exact list of his liabilities, which he had been asked to prepare, and he said to the Colonel, when they were alone:

"I have the papers ready for Leader and Wyllie, sir. The figure is, as near as I can make out, just below what you calculated. I cannot quite remember the amount of one of my acceptances, but I can give it within ten pounds. Thank you again for being so good to me."

Neville scrutinized Geoffrey's face closely. There was no sign of guilt in the eyes, which now looked straight enough into the Colonel's face. There was a slight blush on the youthful

cheeks, but it was not that of conscious guilt, but rather an emotion of gratitude. Again he put away the horrible thought which would persist in obtruding itself. Geoffrey could know nothing about it. So the two journeyed up to London, and in the morning they walked round to the Strand. Here the Colonel went into the bank, while Geoffrey was told to wait outside for a few minutes. He was soon summoned in, and found his guardian seated at a table with an elderly, close-shaven gentleman, with a severe cast of countenance. Both looked very grave.

"My ward, Geoffrey Clare," said the Colonel. "Sit down, Geoffrey!"

The young man felt that something dreadful was coming, but for the life of him could not guess what. He had told his guardian all—all he could remember. So he obeyed, trembling.

"Will you hand me that bill, Mr. Rooper? Thank you. Now, Geoffrey, do you see this slip of paper?" asked the Colonel, holding up a long, narrow strip, about the size of an ordinary cheque.

"Yes, sir," said Geoffrey, surprised.

"Now look at it very carefully," continued the Colonel, placing it on the table before Geoffrey, who was about to take it up to examine it more closely, when Mr. Rooper put his forefinger on it.

"Don't touch it, please, young gentleman!" said he.

Geoffrey stooped over the table and stared at the document. As he did so, a hot flush rose to his face, for suddenly there came back to his mind the recollection of an evening at the Royal Albert Club, of sundry games of *écarté*, and of many slips of paper. For a short time there was complete silence in the bank parlour. Then Mr. Rooper spoke.

"Have you ever seen that paper before, sir?"

Geoffrey looked at his guardian in a bewildered way.

"Answer truthfully, Geoffrey, if indeed you *can* speak the truth," said the Colonel, bitterly.

The youth no longer hesitated. He remembered the Colonel's goodness and Mellis' advice to "make a clean breast of it."

"Yes," he answered.

"Do you know who wrote the signature? *my* signature?" added Mr. Rooper.

"Yes," replied Geoffrey again; "I did."

"Oh God!" cried the Colonel. "Then it is true!" His face turned to ashy white. He clutched the table with both hands. "Thank heaven that your poor father is no longer alive to see what his son has come to."

"Calm yourself, Colonel Neville," said Mr. Rooper, while Geoffrey, on whom the use to which the paper had been put only began to dawn slowly, stared from one to the other with a pale face. Then he suddenly seemed to understand.

"I wrote this at the Albert Club, to show Templar how my guardian signed his name. But it was a blank sheet."

"A blank sheet?" asked the Colonel, as the colour returned to his face.

"Yes; a blank slip of paper." Then, in disjointed phrases, hurriedly, so that the horrible suspicion should be removed from him as speedily as could be, Geoffrey related his story. How he had been smoking and drinking at the Royal Albert after dinner, and had, no doubt, taken more than was good for him. How Templar and Weevil had summoned him to decide a bet, and what ridiculous mistakes they had both made about Colonel Neville's name. How they had placed the pen in his hand, and how, as he thought, the paper had been thrown into the fire.

Neville grasped at the explanation as a drowning man at a straw, but Mr. Rooper evidently only half believed it.

"Then you got no consideration for this bill?" asked he.

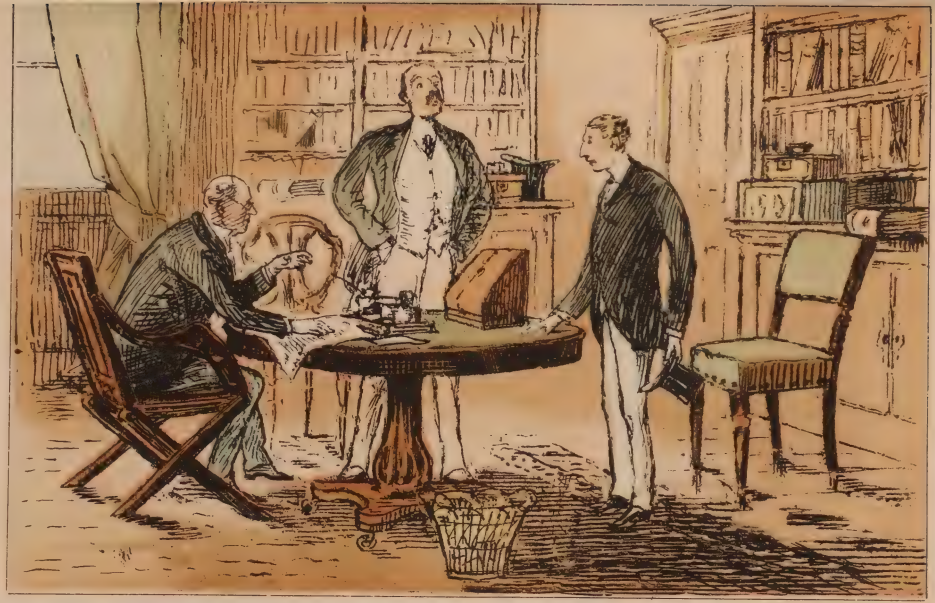
"Consideration?" inquired Geoffrey.

"No money for it?—no cheque, or anything of that sort?"

"Certainly not," replied the youth. "Not a sixpence. How could I? I had no idea that it was a bill at all!"

"When was it cashed?" asked the Colonel.

"On Saturday morning, at half-past ten," replied Mr. Rooper.



"A blank sheet!"

"Cashed!" exclaimed Geoffrey. "Do you mean to say that they have got all the money put down here?"

"The whole, except the discount," replied the banker. "And, I suppose, Mr. Clare, that you don't know anything about the letters of advice either?"

"No," said Clare. "I don't know what they are."

Colonel Neville was suffering tortures, feeling that Mr. Rooper suspected Geoffrey, who was evidently innocent.

"I will go to the club now, Mr. Rooper," he said, "and inquire for the other letter of advice. Then I'll put a detective on the forgers. We will return as soon as this is done."

At the club Colonel Neville discovered, what the reader already suspects—that a person answering to Templar's description had presented his visiting-card, and had asked for any letters addressed to him, which the porter had handed over without hesitation. The private detective, who was at once set to work, soon reported that both Templar and Weevil had left their lodgings, after paying their bills, but giving no address. At the Royal Albert Club nothing was known of either. The birds had flown, and with forty-eight hours' start it was not likely that they would be caught.

Remembering the time at which the bill had been discounted, and knowing that Geoffrey had been at the Manor for more than a week, having found out from their antecedents that Templar and Mellis, though not the sort of men to shrink from a forgery, were not likely to share the proceeds with any one if they could avoid doing so, even Mr. Rooper was obliged at last to admit that Geoffrey appeared only to be guilty of the most egregious folly. As to the Colonel, he felt that the loss of the money was nothing when weighed against the enormous relief of finding his ward innocent. It was, of course, necessary that they should remain in London; and Mellis, soon tired of being alone at the Manor, joined them, and helped vigorously in the attempt to trace the fugitives by the little information he possessed as to their habits. It was discovered that a person answering to the description of Weevil had crossed by the Newhaven boat to

Dieppe on Saturday evening; to Templar, who had probably disguised himself, no clue was found. Mr. Flatman professed himself absolutely ignorant of the whereabouts of these gentlemen, and was of course tremendously indignant when Mr. Leader ventured to drop a hint that he knew their ways and pursuits.

"Sir," said he, assuming the air of an injured person, "I advised lending the money to young Mr. Clare of Castle Clare, and as a matter of form, of course, I asked for another name. But I knew nothing of Mr. Templar or Mr. Weevil, and Mr. Clare is quite mistaken if he now imagines that they were friends of mine."

And exactly a week later, when they had returned to the Manor, Geoffrey was served with a writ in a divorce suit, which Mr. Flatman had entered against Emmeline Flatman and Geoffrey Clare.

He had the courage to show this at once to his guardian.

"Geoff.," said the Colonel, "we have managed to get rid of ten thousand pounds in three months. I have had to bear nearly all of the loss on that bill, though if I had fought it, perhaps I had a chance of making the bank liable. The loss of the letter of advice was our weak point, and besides, I did not want *you* to be dragged into it."

"It was very good of you, sir. How can I ever requite your kindness."

"Well, my boy, neither you nor I can afford this sort of thing, and now there's that rascal Flatman, who will have to be squared. We must shut up the Manor again for a year or two, and save money. Will you come to Ireland with me?"

"Certainly, sir—anywhere."

And so it was settled.

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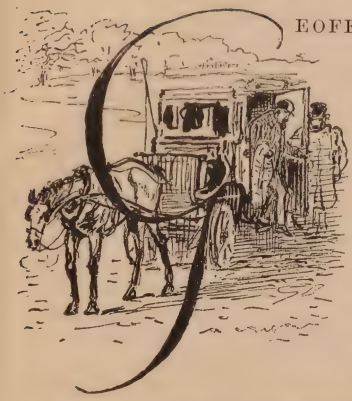
CHAPTER XXVIII.

EXILE.



GEOFFREY'S first few weeks after the catastrophe were not weeks of unalloyed happiness. The more conceited and more self-satisfied a man is, the more pain he feels when a snub comes home. Scouted by the ladies of the county, distrusted by his guardian's friends, avoided by the men whom in his self-confidence he had rebuffed when they offered him advice and help, and probably laughed at behind his back by the very servants, he had also lost his siren, and the swindlers who had served to amuse him. His former occupations, such as they were, being gone, he was fain to fall back on Colonel Neville's society, which, after trial, he did not find quite so uncongenial as he expected.

As to the Colonel himself, no grief he had ever experienced, except perhaps the death of Geoffrey's father, had ever affected him so much and so deeply as the lad's misbehaviour. In the interview described in the last chapter, he had endeavoured to make light of it, for the infliction of pain on one he loved was acuter pain to him. But his disappointment was so grievous that he felt as if life possessed no further attractions for him. He was nervously afraid lest Geoffrey should again

commit some gross folly, notwithstanding the bitter experience of the past two months. So full of anxiety was he for the lad that he spent many weary watches of the night in thinking and planning how to make honourable and gentlemanly pursuits so attractive to the youth as to wean him from his vices. He was not one of those stern moralists who believe the path of virtue to be strait and thorny, and would make it so, if it were not. He felt himself weak and foolish; yet his anxiety was so great that he determined, if he could, to make virtue far more pleasant to Geoffrey than its reverse. Fortunately, he had the means to do so. The Colonel himself was obliged to find the money for the forged bill, but, though a large portion of the Clare estates were in Ireland, and paid but a low interest very irregularly, there was sufficient invested in the funds and in English property to allow of a very handsome sum annually being spent by and for the lucky possessor. At the same time the Colonel felt thoroughly that unless he could interest Geoffrey in his future duties as a large landowner, and make him feel that wealth has its obligations as well as its rights, any improvement in the lad's conduct would rest on insecure foundations. Work of some sort—work regular and absorbing if possible—must turn Geoffrey's thoughts into wholesomer and better channels.

Once more Mrs. Squib was left in undisturbed control of the manor, with Mr. File to keep her company. Mr. Wain was paid off, and was, in fact, no loss, as he was one of those pompous coachmen who consider not only the carriages, but even the horses their own property, and presume to dictate to their masters what he is to ride and drive. Pewter was to accompany his young master to Ireland. The choice had been fairly put before him by the Colonel, who warned him that he would find the place rough and "not what he had been accustomed to." But Pewter was staunch. He had fished in Connemara, said he, with Lord Hedward, and shot in Kerry with Sir James. "It was a rough place," he observed, "where *we* killed the thirty-pound salmon, but we enjoyed ourselves

amazing. I don't suppose Castle Clare will be much wuss. Them Irish are rum coves, but they ain't altogether quite so black as they're painted."

In the case of François, however, it was difficult to arrive at a decision. Tom Kirk was consulted by letter, and to Colonel Neville's surprise, drove over in a Bancaster fly one morning, having travelled as fast as he could from County Carberry.

"Why, what on earth brings you, Tom?" cried the Colonel, who had been concocting a letter to Messrs. Leader and Wyllie, in which task Geoffrey was pretending or trying to help.

"My dear fellow," replied Mr. Kirk, shaking hands with the Colonel, and pressing Geoffrey's in a marked and friendly manner; "your letter brought me."

"My letter?"

"Yes. Did you not ask my opinion whether François should come to Castle Clare?"

"Well," said the Colonel; "I did not mean you to rush off at once, though of course I am delighted to see you. You might have written, you know."

"Writing is of no use in matters of grave importance," replied Mr. Kirk. "You see, I could not give an opinion without hearing what *your* views are, and, above all, what François himself thinks. I would not for the world decide such a question hastily. But just now I want something to eat; for of course I have not breakfasted. Let me see whether François has forgotten his cunning at turning out a good *déjeûner* at a quarter of an hour's notice. I should not wonder, because really I don't think you keep him up to the mark at all, Neville."

However, François' efforts proved not wholly unsatisfactory to Mr. Tom Kirk when that gentleman, refreshed by a bath, settled down to the light refection prepared for him. He condescended to express his approval, and then begged Colonel Neville and Geoffrey to assist him with their advice.

"You see, Geoff," he began, "I want *your* view as well as

Neville's. Of course I know you are a young man, and at your age I cannot expect to find the same acute perception of the difference between a fair dinner and a good dinner, as I would in an older one—in myself, for instance."

"Of course not," said Geoffrey, laughing.

"But," continued Mr. Kirk, blowing the smoke from his cigarette through his nose (he always smoked in that way, as, in his opinion, to blow the smoke from one's mouth blunted the palate); "you wish to give your friends a good dinner when they come to see you, don't you?"

"I should prefer it," replied Geoffrey; "I don't want to cod them on muck. I want to do them well all round."

"A very praiseworthy sentiment, though, perhaps, not expressed with classical correctness. That being so, and as I know the Colonel quite agrees with you, tell me, will you be having friends at Castle Clare?"

"Of course," answered the Colonel; "why County Carberry is full of nice people."

"My dear fellow," said Tom, warmly; "*à qui le dites vous?*" I have been there less than a month, and I am enchanted. Nice people? I should think so, indeed! The very kindest most hospitable, and charming on the face of the earth. And as to the girls—if I were a marrying man I should have married half a dozen of them already——"

"You would not!" interrupted the Colonel. "You would have been engaged, and have broken it off on discovering that your future wife did not know what a *vol-au-vent* was."

"Well hit! There you have me, Neville. I admit that, in matters pertaining to the noble science, their education has been lamentably neglected. And that brings me to the point of my question. If you are going to have none but Carberry people at the Castle, there is not the least occasion for François."

"But," said the Colonel, "I want to give my friends a good dinner, even though they be Carberry people."

"Pooh! François cannot give *them* what they call a good dinner. The *menu* they ask for, and like best, is simplicity

itself: some sort of strongish soup; boiled salmon fresh out of the water, with some melted butter; a couple of skinny fowls roasted, with potatoes in their jackets; and a pie. Fancy a pie!"

"What sort of pie?" asked Geoffrey.

"What they call a pie is a tart of the old approved style. It consists of a small basin inverted, and some stewed fruit in a pudding-dish, covered by a hard, tough, and almost waterproof lid made of flour. That's your pie. It's what they like, and they eat the lid; but you don't want François to cook *that!* Upon my honour, the Carberry ladies are so quite delightful, that I am really sorry to say anything which might be considered disrespectful of them. But is not meant so."

"Go on," said Neville. "What were you going to say that might be misinterpreted in Carberry?"

"I was going to say," replied Kirk, "that to set François to cook a dinner for them would be to cast pearls before——. Never mind, I won't go on, though there are many nice, sweet, pretty little pigs in the world."

The others laughed. "But," said the Colonel, "I propose having people from England. Geoffrey is sure to ask some men over, too, when we get some sailing and shooting. Will you not, Geoffrey?"

The youth, who had fancied that he would have no other society at Castle Clare than his guardian and Mr. Kirk, had much rejoiced in the latter gentleman's enthusiasm about the Carberry ladies, and was now further relieved at the suggestion that he might ask friends over. He assented at once.

"In that case," said Mr. Kirk, "we may, I suppose, take François. But will he stop when he finds out what a place it is?"

"There is a very good kitchen," objected the Colonel; "and you have bought a new range."

"Pah! as if that were everything! Poor Neville! you're a good man, no doubt, and a capital soldier; but, look here, old fellow, you would make a deuced bad cook. Send for François."

"François, my friend," began Mr. Kirk, when that functionary entered, "the Colonel, Monsieur Geoffrey, and I are going to Ireland."

François bowed.

"Do you wish to accompany us?—of course, on the same conditions as here?"

"If the Colonel has still confidence in me," answered François.

"Now, François," continued Mr. Kirk, "it is a horrible country, and I think it is fair to tell you so beforehand."

The cook turned pale. "Will they kill me, Monsieur Tom?"

"Not at all; not in that way. You will be as safe as in Bankshire."

The colour returned to François' face.

"But," continued Mr. Kirk, "the butcher only kills *meat* once a week, and then it is often very tough."

"We must select a good, fat beast," replied François. "Not big, but of good race. And of that beast we must have the best and hang it."

"True. But it is very inconvenient not to be able to buy meat when when you want it."

"No doubt, Monsieur Tom. But Monsieur Tom may not be aware of the miseries made me by the Bancaster butchers. They are all *canaille*—one worse than the other."

"I certainly did not know it," said Tom. "Perhaps Carberry will be no worse. But you cannot get kidneys when you want them."

François shrugged his shoulders. "Bancaster again, Monsieur Tom!"

"The kitchen-maid is not accustomed to cleanliness," continued Kirk.

"She must clean, or she must make her packets, and go," replied François.

"And"—Mr. Kirk had reserved his heaviest shot for the end—"there are no vegetables."

"No vegetables? Then, Monsieur Tom, it is indeed a savage country. But is there no garden at the château?"

"Yes, there is a garden, but the gardener grows nothing but cabbages and parsnips and onions. A few peas, perhaps; but no herbs, no spinach, no salsify, no lettuce, no *romaine*——

"Monsieur Tom," said François, solemnly, interrupting him, "a brave man does not permit himself to be afraid. It is now spring; if Monsieur will do me the favour to send to the gardener the seeds, in two months we will have the herbs growing, and until then, *ma foi*, Monsieur Tom and the Colonel must be satisfied with *conserves*."

"Then you will come?" asked Tom.

"Certainly. I can find a place in London, and I am sure of getting good conditions of salary. But, Monsieur le Colonel, shall I ever find such a gentleman as Monsieur Tom to help me, to understand my efforts, to forgive small accidents, and to inspire an artist with new and magnificent ideas? *Neverre! neverre!*" exclaimed François, extending his arms and spreading his hands. "Better go to savage Ireland with Monsieur Tom, than even to France to serve an ignorant, a *parvenu*."

Thus the knotty point was settled, and Mr. François took charge of the vast kitchen at Castle Clare. Of the horses, the carriage horses were sold; while old Patrick and the Colonel's grey, as of course, Mr. Kirk's cob, and Geoffrey's two, were sent over. And in the preparation for departure, Geoffrey found much to amuse him and to divert his thoughts, though he had been much hurt by not being asked to a ball given by Lady Denvers, and still more by being blackballed for the Bankshire County Club, where he had been proposed before the catastrophe, but, unfortunately, was not balloted for till after it.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR. KAVANAGH'S HOUNDS.

"It is too late to try and make up a pack of hounds now," said the Colonel one morning at breakfast, soon after the party had arrived at Castle Clare. "Every one has disposed of the old hounds and puppies they don't want."

"Then what the deuce are we to do next winter?" asked Mr. Kirk: "we must hunt somehow. Besides, the place is absolutely overrun with foxes."

"They all want us to hunt the country," remarked Geoffrey, "but they say we shan't be able to ride across it."

"*I* shall not, at any rate," said Kirk. "I never jump anywhere. But as to these awful banks, mostly with bogs behind them, they are enough to frighten any fellow."

"Don't you ever jump that clever cob of yours?" asked Geoffrey, slyly.

"Never," replied Mr. Kirk, unblushingly. "Well," he added, *sotto voce*, "hardly ever. Hold your tongue, you rascal!"

"I have had a letter from old Kavanagh," said the Colonel, "offering me his pack if I like to buy them right out, and also placing his services at my disposal. The suggestion is worth considering."

"Who is Kavanagh?" inquired Geoffrey.

"A decent old chap who, like all the small landlords and many big ones, has come down in the world. He used to hunt County Cloyne, away "casht," as they say here. But there is no subscription there now. Shall we drive over to-morrow, Geoff, and have a look at the hounds?"

"By all means," said the youth.

* * * * * *

"Here," said Mr. Kavanagh, proudly throwing open the door of a tiny house, "are my hounds."

For a minute or two neither Geoffrey nor Neville could make out anything in the gloom of the kennels. Their ears were assailed by wild howls, their nose by odours not of Araby. Soon, however, they were able to perceive a mass of dogs tumbling over each other in their eagerness to approach Denis Kavanagh, who laid about him pretty vigorously with a whip to keep the beasts at a respectful distance. Closing the low door behind him so that the place was now entirely dark, he groped for the hasp of another opening; nor was it an easy task to find it, as the hounds were incessantly hampering his movements. At last, however, he admitted air and daylight, and the prisoners, both bipeds and quadrupeds, rushed eagerly out into the tiny yard; the former, however, had to stoop to creep out of a hole not more than three feet high.

Denis Kavanagh was the last to emerge, proud and pleased, and evidently quite unconscious that the two Englishmen were somewhat affected by the darkness and smell of the kennel, which to him were matters of necessity. When persons ignorant of the "points" of hounds are asked what they think of a pack, the most prudent answer is, "They are a nice level lot." But no one could possibly have said this of Mr. Kavanagh's hounds. They were of all sorts and sizes. There was the diminutive harrier, and the great overgrown English foxhound, drafted from a kennel for his height and clumsiness. There were broad, thick dogs, with heavy jowls and overhanging lips like bloodhounds; there were tall lanky ones, with apparently a strain of the country greyhound.

Even Colonel Neville was, at first, unable to say anything. Geoffrey was simply appalled. Meanwhile the creatures were growling, fighting, leaping over each other's heads, and far more friendly in their greetings to the strangers than the latter at all liked.

"What do you think of them now, sor, as a sportsman?" asked Denis Kavanagh, addressing the Colonel.

The supreme moment had come. Neville *must* say something. But what could he say that should not be offensive? Geoffrey saw his guardian's difficulty, and boldly rushed in to his rescue. He had a sudden inspiration.

"They are *not* a particularly level lot, Mr. Kavanagh, are they?" he asked, audaciously.

"They are not," admitted Mr. Kavanagh; "but they are wonderfully good dogs, entirely. They are great at a hunt."

The tension was relieved. The Colonel breathed again. He cast a look of heartfelt thankfulness at his ward.

"I daresay they are good hounds," murmured he. "Now that black and white one over there has capital shoulders and a pretty head."

"He has, he has," said Mr. Kavanagh. "That's Rasper, one of the best of the lot. He's an English hound. But most English hounds are of no value in this country."

"Indeed?" asked the Colonel, surprised. "What is their fault?"

"Look at Messmate," replied Mr. Kavanagh, calling a clumsy animal with a head too big for his body. "Run, he will run fairly enough, but divil a bit will he hunt. He will not go into cover at all."

"Probably drafted for shirking," muttered the Colonel. Then, aloud, "Where did you get him?"

"I had him from a friend of mine in Cheshire," replied Denis Kavanagh: "and sure I won't trouble him again. He sent me Messmate, the lazy brute, and another hound that I've hung and buried under an apple-tree for worrying sheep."

"But do you find *all* English hounds as bad?" asked the Colonel. "Now, that young one over there looks well made, and ought to be a good one."

"She is *not*, sor," replied Mr. Kavanagh, emphatically. "I just keep her for the looks of the thing, because I have not enough, otherwise I'd hang her too; but if you want good hounds, look at these. Here, Woodbine, little lass! Warrior, old man!"

"Not a particularly level lot."

The two hounds in question had the bodies and colour of a *dachshund*, but their legs were longer and undeniably straight.

"Them are the dogs for game," said Denis, proudly. "If there's a fox in the wood, dipind upon it they'll have him out. And then there's Saulaman. Here, Saulaman, old man, come and show the gentleman what you're like!"

Solomon had certainly a wise face, but beyond the appearance of wisdom there was nothing to strike the beholder. Long in the body and slack in the loins, he might find a fox, but it looked doubtful whether he would run him twenty yards.

Denis Kavanagh did not spare them the pedigrees of the mongrels which filled his kennels. He was particularly strong on the old Irish blood. "Lord Mallow's, you know," of which a strain was, in his opinion, absolutely necessary. He admitted that a cross of the English foxhound might improve the breed, infusing dash and speed; but "give me an old Irish dog for this country, as you will find out, sor, when you come to ride over it; and every dog in my kennel has some of it more or less, barring Messmate and Swift, and they are not much good. Sorry I am to part with them, Colonel, but I cannot afford to hunt the country any longer. Now, git away with ye, ye brutes!" and slashing his whip among the hounds to make room, he showed his visitors out.

"What do you think of them, Geoffrey?" asked the Colonel, taking the lad aside when they had gained the street.

"They look a rum lot," replied he. "I should not like to own them, nor to be seen about with them."

"Nor should I," assented the Colonel. "They may be good ones to hunt, as he says, but I'm blessed if I could stand such a scratch lot."

"I am very curious to see them out," said Geoffrey.

"So am I, and will take the first opportunity, as soon as cubbing begins. But we won't buy them—not if I know it."

"Mr. Kavanagh," said the Colonel to that gentleman, "can you not manage to continue hunting?"

"I cannot. I cannot get any rints from the blackguards.

They don't pay, and of course the gentry don't subscribe. I must sell them. And I'm not asking too much money, surely? Thim are as nice a pack of hounds as any sportsman could wish for in this country. They'll show you many a fine hunt, sor."

"I am not quite prepared to buy them," answered the Colonel. "Mr. Clare has a fancy for getting a pack together himself." Poor Kavanagh's face fell. "But I tell you what I'll do," added the Colonel. "I'll subscribe twenty guineas to your hounds, if you can keep the pack together, and Mr. Clare will, I am sure, do the same—will you not, Geoffrey?"

"Certainly," replied the youth, knowing that the money would come out of Colonel Neville's pocket.

"Will you be able to keep them on with this help?" asked the latter.

"Indeed and I will, Colonel, and I'm very much obliged to you, sor. It would have gone near breaking my heart too, to part with the darlints. But I've a great many expenses, and I thought I could not do otherwise."

"Now, Mr. Kavanagh, as it is getting late, and we can in no case reach home at a reasonable hour, I think Mr. Clare and I will stop at Garryowen to-night."

"I wish I could ask you to stop with me," exclaimed Kavanagh enthusiastically; "will you come to my house and rough it?"

"No, no," answered the Colonel, "we will not trouble you. You must dine with us at the hotel, and we'll be off early in the morning. I would not disturb Mrs. Kavanagh for worlds."

Now the fact was that grizzly, good-natured Denis was in mortal fear of his wife. Scarcely had he invited the strangers to stop in his house, when terror seized upon him, lest Mrs. Kavanagh might disapprove. In his little shanty there was scarce room for any visitors, and Denis's hospitality had outrun his judgment. So he was glad of the loophole offered him."

"I'll be delighted," he said. "Donovan can give us a rale good dinner. We had better go and see to it at once."

Donovan's rale good dinner would have shocked Tom Kirk. There was dressed crab to begin with, and this was a *spécialité* of

Garryowen, and cooked to perfection. But the remainder of the work was scarcely up to the standard of the first chapter. Roast mutton, under-done, and a succession of dishes of steamed potatoes, hot and hot, satisfied Mr. Kavanagh, but were not thoroughly pleasing to the Colonel, the less so as the new potatoes had not yet come in; for all eatables, animal and vegetable, in Ireland, are left to nature unassisted, and no efforts are ever made to have early lambs, early peas, early spring chickens, or, in fact, anything else early. The old potatoes were black and nasty, but the one thing that notoriously cannot be obtained in Ireland, is a good potato well cooked, so Mr. Kavanagh did not mind, and Geoffrey pretended to enjoy it. There was, however, no pretence whatever about Mr. Kavanagh's enjoyment of the wine. Donovan's "rale good dinner" was a comparative failure, but he pulled out some very excellent champagne, and followed this up by a couple of dusty bottles of old port out of the extreme recesses of the cellar. Next, Mr. Warren and a friend came in. So all began to mellow under the benign influence of the wine. Geoffrey laughed immoderately at Denis Kavanagh's brogue and his stories, and even the Colonel joined in the roar which greeted some of the quaint old sportsman's sallies. The latter's spirits became exuberant whenever his hand strayed to the waistcoat pocket where the Colonel's cheque for £40 was lurking. He filled his glass twice to every other man's once, and soon its effects became apparent. They increased so rapidly, and Denis Kavanagh became so very lively, that Colonel Neville at last hinted broadly that he wished to go to bed, as he and Clare had to make an early start in the morning.

"Good night, gintlemen," said Denis shrilly, his brogue growing on him as he became more and more tipsy. "But we'll drink one drop more, just another drop of the craythur."

With these words he seized a champagne bottle, and poured himself out half a tumbler-full of *Pommery sec*.

"Here's good luck to ye," he said, lifting it to his lips; "you're a sportsman, and so's the young gintleman. Here's good luck to Clare of Castle Clare."

He drained the tumbler to its last drop. Then, smacking his lips, he banged it on the table and exclaimed :—

"The very best whishkey ever tasted! Never tasted such good whishkey before."

It was high time to get Mr. Kavanagh home. The Colonel

and Geoffrey were both hungry for a breath of fresh air, and volunteered to see him to his door, which was but a couple of hundred yards distant. Mr. Warren and his friend followed.

"Catch hold of him under the arm, Geoff," said the Colonel.

"All right, governor, I won't let him slide. Hold up, old chap!" cried Geoffrey, delighted with Mr. Kavanagh's futile attempts to walk straight.

Between them they lugged the M. F. H. to his door, and dragged him up the steps. They looked round, but Mr.

Warren had discreetly retired, so they propped him up against the door and rang the bell. No one came for some time. No sound was audible, save Mr. Kavanagh muttering, "Besht whishkey ever tashted!" They rang again, and then again. At the third peal the door opened suddenly, and Mr. Kavanagh dropped flat on his back into the passage. Over his prostrate body appeared an elderly female, in *déshabille*, her grey locks escaping from a huge nightcap, flourishing a guttering tallow-candle.

"So it's you, ye dirty blackgaird," she cried, in a shrill voice, not perceiving the two at the door. "And what do ye mane by coming home at this hour of the night blind drunk, ye baste?"

Poor Denis, screwed though he was, still had some lurking consciousness of "*les convenances*."

"Hush, darlint," he stammered, rising to his knees (for he could get no further), and holding up his uncertain hands in deprecation, "there's some gintlemen brought me home."

"Foine gintlemen, indade, to make a silly man drunk like that. Git up, ye pig."

Geoffrey was holding on to the area railings yelling with laughter. The Colonel was almost as bad. The young man stepped forward.

"We're very sorry, madam, that you should be annoyed."

"Git away, ye spalpeen," cried Mrs. Kavanagh when she held up the flaming candle to his face and saw its youthfulness. "Git away from a dacent body's house, will ye, ye dirty divil!"

And with these words she slammed the door violently. They heard her shrill voice grow gradually fainter as she dragged her poor husband upstairs, and they could make out weak deprecatory murmurs in return.

"But he's a dacent fellow, is Denis," said Mr. Warren, as he bade them good night. "He'll handle a pipe with any man; and he can show you a good hunt, surely."

"What is handling a pipe?" asked Geoffrey, in a whisper.

"Oh, lighting a pipe, taking a puff or two, and then passing it round to the rest of the company," replied Colonel Neville.

"Oh!" said Geoffrey, in a tone of anguish. "Good night, sir!"

CHAPTER XXX.

BOYCOTTING.

Almost every one in County Carberry knew that Geoffrey Clare had been "rather wild," but he had not trodden on the moral corns of the local people, and the Bankshire scandals did not reach so far. So the ladies, who are always the least bit prejudiced in favour of a young man of great expectations, were very willing to believe that they had been misinformed; while the men were ready to welcome warmly one whose interests in their county were so large, and on whose conduct so much depended. For the agitation was at its worst; the farmers in Carberry had nearly all joined the National League; the ignorant labourers followed them blindly, not seeing that however much the occupier of the soil might benefit by the abolition of rent, its tillers would gain nothing. Few of the landlords were in Geoffrey's fortunate position. The majority lived on their rents, and had no other resource. If the farmers did not pay they must work to earn their living, or starve. And though the young men were willing to go forth to seek their fortunes, their fathers, who had lived all their lives in comparative affluence, and without any care for the morrow, could not, at a mature age, suddenly discover a new means of livelihood.

Not a week had elapsed before Geoffrey had discovered that the jovial, kindly country gentlemen who had welcomed him so heartily, were many of them obliged to scrape and pinch to pay for the mere necessaries of life for their families, while there was not one who was able to indulge freely in the pursuits considered specially fitted for large landowners. The sins of the fathers were indeed being visited on the children with frightful severity. Former landlords had been extravagant, thoughtless, and indolent; careless of the condition of their tenants, living their own jolly lives among their friends, sending younger sons

into the army and navy, and letting the eldest and the girls grow up as they would, and learn what they could. Others, again, like Geoffrey Clare's father, had dwelt in England, and had simply drawn so much a year from their estates; which to them represented nothing but pounds, shillings, and pence, and gave them no more thought than if the barren hillsides and bleak moorlands on which the farmer could scarcely live, had been inscribed certificates in Government Stock. Now, in a few short years, everything had changed. The terrible realities of life came home to the most indolent of resident landlords: the most careless of absentees was startled to find his remittances falling off, and shocked to hear that his agent had been shot at and perhaps killed.

A few, very few, had, previously to the agitation, realised that to receive rents and spend them was not the whole duty of man, even though they might also go to church twice on Sundays, keep open house, and treat their own and their friend's servants hospitably in the back premises. The new ideas were, however, brought home to them by means which were not calculated to carry conviction. Revolutions are always more or less violent, and agrarian revolts are proverbially brutal. Boycotting, maiming of cattle, and shooting of objectionable persons, were not exactly the best methods of convincing the landlords that they had much to atone for and much to do. Then came the Land Act, a legalised robbery of the landowners, which, however, restored to the tenants at least as much as the previous rack-renting had taken from them, so that strictly speaking they had no further cause for complaint. But the spirit of disorder and rebellion once roused could not easily be allayed, and while still further reductions of rent were loudly demanded, the brutal attacks of the National Leaguers were now directed against poor men who would not join them rather than against the landlords who, though with fear in their hearts, defied them.

Into the middle of this turmoil, into the very centre of agitation, these three Englishmen were plunged. Neville and

Kirk had indeed striven for the past few months to do their best by the Clare tenants, and to restore peace at least on this one estate. But Geoffrey knew nothing and cared nothing for politics generally, still less for Irish home politics, which, like too many young Englishmen, he considered a nuisance and a bore. He was soon to become interested in them against his will, though for the first few weeks everything seemed quiet and pleasant, and the harrowing tales told by the county people who called at Castle Clare sounded exaggerated, if not entirely fictitious.

There was much to repair and put in order in and about the house, which had been terribly neglected. Plaster had come down in great sheets; grass was growing in the stable-yard; drains had fallen in; the loose boxes and stalls were stripped of their fittings; huge heaps of rubbish had accumulated in corners. Having nothing else to do, Geoffrey, rather unwillingly, agreed to help in getting things straight. He devoted his mornings to superintending the workmen, and assisted Mr. Kirk by relieving that gentleman of a portion of his self-imposed labour. At first, everything went smoothly. A number of labourers, and about half-a-dozen hired carts, were employed about the place, for pay which would be considered very small in England, but was, in fact, in fair proportion to the very trifling amount of work done. It was a new pleasure to Geoffrey to see order and neatness gradually evolved from dirt and untidiness, and the task which he had first undertaken out of deference for his guardian, as a disagreeable but necessary concession to one who had been so good to him, gradually became quite easy, if not positively attractive. The men were amusing and intelligent; they overflowed with conversation which was far more pleasant to them than work; and Geoffrey was not a hard master. He did not get up very early; and, not knowing what an able-bodied man can do, he did not press on them unduly. Colonel Neville indeed noticed that the fellows were not making very rapid progress, but said nothing, as he was unwilling to be hard on men who were not only quite unused to

regular steady work, but whom their miserable diet had unfitted for it. While Colonel Neville returned all the neighbours' visits and left his ward's cards on them, Geoffrey generally stopped at home, professedly to superintend the men, but, in reality, because he was afraid that he might renew, in County Carberry, his experiences of Bankshire society. He had been snubbed and sat upon to such an extent in England, that his courage now failed him, and he was most unwilling to face the Irish ladies, though Mr. Kirk was so full of their praises. Neville was far too sensible to try and force his ward's inclination. A little shyness was not out of place after Geoffrey's recent audacity. So the ladies, young and old, were very curious about the young man, and he became an interesting, almost fascinating, person by mere inactivity, which, in this case, was masterly. He absolutely declined the two first dinner-parties to which he was invited, and, as Tom Kirk would not exchange François' cooking for the soup, boiled fish and roast he knew too well, the two dined together at home, while the Colonel drove over with lame apologies for their absence.

An event soon occurred which gave Geoffrey new interest in his occupations. One morning, not a man nor a cart was to be seen in the garden and stable-yard, where there was still employment for many.

"What is the matter, Jerry?" said Geoffrey to their stolid, good-humoured, and singularly honest head stableman. "Why are the men not at work? Is it a Catholic holiday?"

"It is not, yer honour," said Jerry.

"Then why are they not here to-day? Where are they?"

"It's just outside the gates they are, yer honour," replied Jerry, looking confused and rather silly.

"Why don't they come in and set to work?"

"Sure, and I don't exactly know, yer honour," answered Jerry again, turning away, and becoming suddenly very busy polishing up the brasswork of some harness.

Geoffrey began to get cross, but seeing that there was nothing

to be got out of Jerry, walked off to the gate. There he found a knot of men hanging about, and looking very sulky.

"What is the matter, boys?" he said. "Why don't you go to work?"

They shifted uneasily from the right leg to the left, and back again to the right. One of them pretended to be trying in vain to light a match. Another stuffed his pipe vigorously. A third gave what remained of his braces a hitch. But no one answered. Geoffrey repeated his question. There was some whispering and more confusion, but no reply. Then Jerry, who had by this time repented sending out his young and inexperienced master to deal with the sulky crew, pulled Clare by the sleeve, and drawing him aside, whispered into his ear:

"It's along of Mike Driscoll, yer honour."

"What about Mike Driscoll?" enquired Geoffrey.

"He's got no friends, yer honour. The boys do not like Mike Driscoll, and the Colonel has got his cart here at work."

"I know he has," replied Geoffrey. "Before the Colonel went away,"— for Neville had gone on a trip to Meath to look after some hounds—"he told me to put on Mike's cart if I could, and I ordered him to be here this morning. What has the fellow done that the others won't work with him?"

"Sure, I don't entirely know," was all Jerry would or could say.

Here was a puzzle. Colonel Neville was likely to be absent for several days. Mr. Kirk was at the house, and him Geoffrey at once consulted. They summoned Jerry, and, after a long cross-examination, at length managed to get the truth out of him, which was fully confirmed by the further enquiries they made among the men permanently employed.

Mike Driscoll had paid his rent to Mr. Long, one of their neighbours, while the remainder of Mr. Long's tenants had refused to do so unless an enormous reduction were made. Mike was therefore boycotted. He was a small farmer, but industrious withal, and anxious to take the unusual opportunity of extra work being offered to turn an honest penny. A week

ago, he had applied to Colonel Neville for employment, and the Colonel, quite unaware that this was an "objectionable" man, promised him to hire his horse and cart as soon as there was room for them. Clare had acted on his guardian's instructions, and the result was that the other men all turned out.

When all this was ascertained Clare was very angry, and Mr. Kirk scarcely less so. They went to the gate, and found out that Mike and his cart had retired from the scene, terrified by the threats of the malcontents. They all said they would work if Mike were not employed, but would not work with him.

"Go at once and fetch Mike Driscoll back," said Clare to Jerry. "He is a decent, quiet fellow, and never has done anyone any harm."

"Sure, and he is, yer honour," a voice said out of the crowd.

"Then why won't you work with him, you fools?" asked Clare, angrily.

For some time there was no answer; but when Clare and Kirk pressed the question, one at last ventured to murmur:

"Sure, we'd be kilt if we did!"

"Nonsense!" said Clare. "I will tell you, however, that I shall take down the name of every man who refuses to work with Mike, and not one shall ever get a sixpence nor an hour's employment from the Castle again."

There was consternation among them, and whispering.

"Sure, yer honour would not be hard upon poor men," said the former spokesman at last—a great stalwart fellow, who looked equal to any amount of work, but was the laziest of the whole gang. "We don't dare, yer honour; we'd be kilt surely!"

"Of whom are you afraid, you great gaby?" asked Tom Kirk. "Why, you're big enough to knock down any two of the rest."

"We'd be kilt in our beds, yer honour!" said another.

"Pooh!" laughed Kirk. "Well, you may do as you please; but I'm sure Colonel Neville will back Mr. Clare up in this matter; and if you go away, you will never have a chance of coming back."

"We'll have to put up with it, then," said the big man, shouldering his shovel, for he saw Mike Driscoll approaching with his cart.

"Are you afraid to go to work here, Mike?" asked Clare.

"I am not, yer honour," replied the man, hesitatingly, and looking at the sullen faces surrounding him with some trepidation.

"Let me whisper a word to yer honour," said Jerry, eagerly, drawing Clare aside. "For God's sake, sir, send Mike away. Give him a shilling, sir, for he's a poor man, and let him go home; then the boys will come to work and will be all quiet again."

"What do you say to that, Mr. Kirk?" asked Geoffrey of Tom, who had followed the two inside the gates. "If we give in, we shall never be masters in this place again."

"But if we don't, there will be a jolly row," remarked Mr. Kirk. "I really do not know what to advise."

"The Colonel's honour is in the North, too, Mr. Clare," said Jerry, entreatingly. "Let me send Driscoll home. Yer honour can give the poor man a trifle."

Geoffrey had been rapidly turning things over in his mind. There was a huge mass of rubbish to be removed. It was just inside the gates, but it had to be taken away, and any carts removing it must cross and recross the public road, over which neither Clare nor any private person had authority. It was on this heap that he wished to employ Mike's cart.

He stepped forward among the men. "Now, boys," said he, "I intend to be master here, and I am not going to take your orders as to whom I shall employ and whom I shall discharge. Driscoll has asked for work, and as he has as good a right as any of you, I have promised to put him on with his horse and cart. You are not bound to work with him, if you don't choose to do so. But every man that leaves will be put on the black list, and will never get a job here again. As to Driscoll, I'll take care of him. I'll see that not a hair of his head is touched. Drive in, Mike, and tackle that big heap of plaster and rubbish there."

All this was said firmly, and in a clear voice, which every man heard distinctly. Driscoll drove into the yard, and backed his cart against the heap of rubbish.

"Now," said Clare, "load up for him, boys. Don't be such fools as to lose your day's wages and your chance of other jobs."

"Look, yer honour," whispered Jerry, "there's boys watching them!"

There, on the other side of the public road, behind what we call in England a bank, but what is termed in Erin a ditch, were three heads. The moment Clare looked that way, they disappeared; but Jerry and Dunn, the cowkeeper, had recognised them. One was that of a man named Murphy, formerly a lawyer's clerk in Kildonan, now the proprietor of a disreputable drinking-shop, and a prominent member of the National League; the other two belonged to the class of "corner boys," always delighted to do anything except honest work—always ready to spy, to report, to invent, or to steal for a drink.

"It's no use, sir," said Mike Driscoll, addressing Clare respectfully. "They won't load my cart, and I don't want to get yer honour into trouble. I won't mind about the job. I will go home."

"You will *not*," said Clare, emphatically, the same spirit which had caused him to interfere at the "Imperial," and had brought him to Vine Street Police Station, being now aroused in a better cause. "And if they won't load your cart, I will find someone else to do it. Now boys," continued he, addressing the men, "who is going to work?"

Not one of them stirred.

"It is your last chance. If you do not go to work at once, you will never be employed here again."

Still no one moved.

"Very well then," he continued, "I will take your names down, and you shall be paid off at once."

All this time Mr. Kirk had kept in the background, not wishing to interfere in a matter entirely connected with Geoffrey Clare's first assumption of his proper place as owner of Castle

Clare. But when he heard the last observation, he at once offered to fetch his notebook and wages-sheet (for he acted as paymaster), and said in a whisper :

"I believe you are right, Clare. Stick to it, we'll beat them." And as he hurried to the house to fetch his documents and his cash-box, he muttered, "That boy is better grit than I took him for."

Soon he was back again ; and Pewter, who heard that there was a row in prospect, came with him. The cart was still inactive, for few people ever saw an Irish farmer who hires out his cart for the day load it himself. It is a great deal if he will stand and look on while it is being loaded. But Geoffrey did not look upon matters in the same light.

"Turn to, and load your own cart, Driscoll, while we are paying these boys," cried he, and for very shame, Mike was obliged to make a show of beginning, though he was careful not to push the shovel too deep into the rubbish, nor to let the spoonsful he placed on the cart follow each other too rapidly.

"Is that the way you work ?" asked Pewter, taking up a shovel. "I'll show you how we does it in Bankshire !"

Meanwhile Geoffrey and Tom called over the men's names, and when they were paid, they were told to go about their business. But, as they had no business, they did not go. They hung about in the road, and when Driscoll emerged from the gate with his cart, one or other "advised" him to leave the job alone, as the consequences of sticking to it might be serious for his wife and children. Tom Kirk and Geoffrey watched the proceedings as well as they could, and when all the day-labourers employed about the Castle came to claim their wages on the ground that, as their friends were going, they also would go, matters began to look serious. Mike Driscoll showed signs of "funk." He was not used to loading his own cart, and he did not like it. Nor did he relish the "advice" given him by the strikers. On the other hand, there were no faithful men to spare to help him. Jerry and the stable-boys had their work set with the horses ; so had Dunn and his cow-boys on the farm.

"Mr. Kirk," said Geoffrey, "if you don't mind the job, you had better drive into Duneen (the nearest police-station), and fetch a couple of men to protect Mike."

"But," observed Kirk, "I can't be back under an hour."

"Oh!" replied Geoffrey, "never fear. I'll take care of him meanwhile; and Pewter will stand by me."

"In coorse I will, sir," said Pewter, looking up from his work and wiping his brow. "We'll show 'em what we can do."

Tom Kirk thought his young friend would get into a row, and advised him to be careful.

"I'll be careful. I won't have a row if I can avoid it; but, as a last resort, I've a revolver in my pocket."

Kirk was very unwilling to go. If he had known the exact whereabouts of Colonel Neville he would have telegraphed to him, for there was an office in Clare village. But the Colonel's

movements were uncertain, and when Tom hinted that he ought to be summoned home, Geoffrey became very angry.

"The idea of fidgeting him about such a trifle!" he exclaimed. "If you and I and Pewter cannot manage a few sulky Irishmen between us, we cannot be worth much. Leave the dear old governor to collect his pack. He may be anywhere in Westmeath or Galway just now."

"Go yourself," said Mr. Kirk, anxious to get Geoffrey out of harm's way.

"And leave you to give in to these ruffians? Not if I know it," replied the youth.

Six weeks ago Tom Kirk would have laughed to scorn this notion of ever being guided in anything, however unimportant, by Geoffrey Clare. But this morning, somehow, the young man had appeared in a new light. Tom could not yet make out whether it was bounce or not; but, anyhow, he seemed firm enough and far less noisy than in old times. So, with many misgivings Tom started for Duneen. More than once on the road he was tempted to turn back. What would Colonel Neville say if any harm happened to the youngster while he, Kirk, who had been specially enjoined to watch over him, was out of the way? But Kirk knew that police protection might become essential, not indeed for Mr. Driscoll, about whom he was supremely indifferent, but for Geoffrey himself: so, with much doubt and hesitation, he proceeded on his way. No one else could have gone, for none other could have sworn the information on which alone police protection would be granted.

Meanwhile events at the gate were rapidly approaching a crisis. After his fourth trip, when several men had spoken to him, Mike Driscoll laid down the shovel and said:

"I can't be loading the cart and driving the horse, yer honour, I'd better go home."

"You sha'n't stir," replied Geoffrey. "Here, we will load the cart for you, if you're afraid."

"Yer honour surely will not load the cart your own self?"

"Pewter and I will, as there is no one else to do it," said

"Take it easy, Sir!" said Pat

Geoffrey. And with these words he threw his coat off and grasped the shovel. At first it was easy enough. But after he had thrown a few shovels-full of rubbish into the cart, he felt a disagreeable sensation in his arms, which soon increased to positive pain. In ten minutes the perspiration was streaming down his face, and he was hardly able to raise the shovel above his shoulders. But, thank Heaven, the cart was full, and Driscoll went to his horse's head to drive off with the load.

"Stand back, you blackguards," cried Geoffrey, as he followed the cart. "Let honest men work if you won't."

"And if ye don't make room, I'll soon show you an Englishman's fists," said Pewter, squaring up to them.

The men, who had crowded round to watch the unusual spectacle of a landlord working with a shovel, fell back at his command. They were smiling and remarking to each other that the young man would soon be tired of the job.

So he soon became; very tired, tired nigh unto faintness. He had not been brought up in a school to fit him for manual labour. But though his arms ached as if they would fall off, though his temples throbbed, though his throat was parched and his hands smarted, he plodded steadily at his work. He soon found out means of easing it. He did not attempt to dig the shovel too deeply into the rubbish, nor did he endeavour, as at first, to get as much stuff on it as it would carry.

"Take it easy, sir," said Pewter, more cheerfully than elegantly. "Don't work your guts out for these chaps."

Geoffrey proceeded with less enthusiastic vigour, but greater caution. Half-an-hour later he summoned one of the Castle Clare farm carts to help, and though there were now two carts to load, there were four to contribute towards loading, as the farm hand took his turn with Driscoll, Pewter, and Geoffrey, the first-mentioned having been shamed to renewed exertions by his young master's example.

Never had a morning seemed so long to Geoffrey. It appeared an age since Tom Kirk had driven to Duneen, and as yet there was no sign of his return. The number of spectators on the

road had increased. Some of the men went into Clare village, but many loafers from the village and elsewhere collected; none, however, raised a hand to help the young squire. When Geoffrey's back began to ache, and the pain in his arms became all but intolerable, there was a sudden movement in the crowd, and a sound of wheels. He looked up from his work. "The police!" cried some of the men, and way was made for them to step through the gate.

"I want you to look after and protect Mike Driscoll and my farm lad," said Geoffrey. "I have done so myself so far, but as you are here, you can see that no harm happens to them. It is dinner-time now," he added, looking at his watch, "so there will be an hour's rest. Shut the gates, Jim. Let us go and get some lunch, Mr. Kirk. The constables will be looked after in the kitchen."

Mr. Kirk was more surprised than he ever thought he would be again. To find that Geoffrey had been working in the hot sun, with his coat off, for more than three hours, like a common labourer, was indeed a subject of astonishment. But he said nothing—he only thought.

They walked up the avenue to the house, and after a good scrub, Geoffrey sat down to lunch with a thirst which, as he expressed it in his own special slang, "he would not sell for half-a-crown." (It may not be premature to remark here that the young ladies of Carberry adopted this expression with a touching unanimity. A fortnight later every girl in the county used it in cases where an English beauty would have only said, "I'm rather thirsty.")

When the hour's rest was nearly over, a car drove up to the door. It was occupied by Father O'Leary, the parish priest. When this gentleman was introduced, he began in the usual local way by remarking on the fine weather and making elaborate enquiries after the health of all the denizens of the Castle.

"What can I do for you, Father O'Leary?" asked Geoffrey, impatiently. "You must excuse me, as I'm busy to-day."

"My dear young friend," said the priest, suavely, "I am deeply concerned to hear what trouble you are in."

"Trouble, sir? None that I am aware of."

"Trouble with the men, I mean," continued the priest. "Surely that can be all put right."

"Easily," replied Geoffrey; "we are putting it right now. I have sent for other men from Duneen and Clonavilly." This Geoffrey invented on the spur of the moment.

"Oh, sad—very sad," said Father O'Leary, shaking his head. "Surely you would not go out of your own country for labourers, when there is so much poverty and distress here?"

"I am obliged to do so. The men won't obey orders."

"My dear young gentlemen," the priest went on, pursing up his thin lips, and endeavouring to assume his blandest manner, "you are a stranger here, and you don't know the Irish."

"I don't want to if I have seen a fair specimen this morning," replied Geoffrey, rather brutally.

"Dear sir, they are very warm-hearted and very impulsive."

"So it appears," said Geoffrey, drily. "They won't do as they are told, and so they can go. Warm hearts and impulse don't suit me."

"May I advise you, Mr. Clare, as a friend and as a clergyman?" asked Father O'Leary, suavely. "I wish to speak for your own good as well as for that of my flock."

"Drive on, governor," said Geoffrey.

The priest winced. But in his most dulcet tones he continued:

"This Mike Driscoll is an objectionable character—most objectionable, I assure you. The men are quite justified in declining to work with him."

"I do not see anything objectionable in him," answered Geoffrey. "He is lazy, but they're all lazy. He is a quiet, unassuming chap enough."

"I am afraid you do not know him, dear Mr. Clare. He has set up his judgment against that of all his neighbours and his best friends. He is headstrong, and would not take advice."

"Is that all?" said Geoffrey. "Then he's like me. I won't, either."

"Will you not discharge him, Mr. Clare?" said the priest, imploringly. "Believe me, it will be the better for Castle Clare and for everyone. Think of the distress in the country, and of the importance for you to be on good terms with all the poor people."

"I won't discharge him till it suits me," replied Clare, firmly. "And it won't suit me to discharge him till the job is done. Have a glass of wine, Father O'Leary? No? Then, good day; I'm off to my work."

All this time Mr. Kirk had been silent. When Geoffrey had left the room, the priest said to him:

"That is a very foolish, headstrong young man, sir."

"I am sorry you have come on a fruitless errand, Father. But I am bound to tell you that I agree with Mr. Clare. Discipline must be maintained, and he cannot allow the men to dictate to him as to whom he is to employ."

Father O'Leary shook his head, and there was a very sinister expression on his thin lips as he got on his car and drove off.

During the afternoon the crowd of spectators rather increased than diminished, but Geoffrey noticed that the majority of the strikers had disappeared. Tired and aching as both were, he and Pewter resumed the work manfully, and as the gardener now came to help, there was no occasion to work quite as hard as during the morning. Meanwhile the police kept the road clear, and there was no attempt at molestation. Towards four o'clock, Mr. Kirk, who had paid occasional visits to the gate, appeared with the dog-cart.

"I must drive over to Ballyvarty," said he. "To-day is Friday. Hurly will have to pay all the fellows that are cutting the drains and repairing the cottages out there, and I had better take him the money to-night."

"Certainly," said Geoffrey. "Will you be home for dinner? Don't be late, for I shall be very hungry."

"Oh, it is only eight miles," answered Kirk. "I shall be back before seven."

"All right. Good-bye," said Geoffrey, as Tom drove out of the gate.

Ballyvarty was a large village in the extreme west and poorest part of the estate. Thousands of acres of bog and rock surrounded it, and the many farmers in that district were worse off than the rest of the tenantry. Colonel Neville had therefore started extensive drainage and reclamation works, on which more than a hundred men were engaged. It would, he thought, be a good investment, besides helping the people over their present troubles. Some fifty pounds were wanted weekly for wages, which were distributed by a faithful and hard-working foreman, named Hurley, who had for years been struggling in vain to keep his master's land in good order and his master's tenants out of the workhouse.

Slowly the long afternoon wore on. Geoffrey sent for a small cask of local porter, which his few faithful henchmen drank before the thirsty eyes of the onlookers. But he took none himself, and the first excitement having subsided, he found it harder than ever to stick to his work. His hands were bleeding, his arms were sore, his back felt broken. At last the welcome vesper-bells began ringing, and with a sigh of relief, he flung his shovel from him.

"Put the tools away, boys," he cried. "That will do for to-day."

The heap of rubbish had much diminished, but there would still be work enough for a dozen on the morrow.

Geoffrey went up to the house. Never had he so much enjoyed a bath and the cup of tea which followed. When he had changed his clothes, salved his sore hands, and made himself generally comfortable, he still felt as if he had been beaten all over. He drew an arm-chair to the window and looked down the avenue. A black cloud was rising in the west, obscuring the rays of the evening sun. It looked like a thunderstorm.

"Poor Kirk will be drenched," he thought, "unless he is home soon. I am getting very hungry, too."

Soon heavy rain-drops began to fall, at first singly and large,

then smaller and more frequent. Still Kirk did not arrive. The butler came in to ask whether dinner was to be kept for him.

"Wait another quarter of an hour," answered Geoffrey. "Hallo!" he exclaimed, hearing a bell, "that must be he; though why he should ring, I am sure I don't know."

It was not Kirk. It was a telegram from Ballyvarty, "Besieged here by a couple of hundred. Your men have made all the others leave work. Send police to rescue us.—KIRK."

"Send Bob down to the yard, and have Camel put into the cart at once," cried Geoffrey. "Call Pewter to give me my waterproof and a pair of big boots. Look alive, man!"

"What about dinner, sir?" asked the butler.

"Dinner be blowed! Look sharp, I say!"

In five minutes Geoffrey was standing in the pouring rain, ready to start. There were only two constables at the Castle, and he at first intended to take them with him, as Mr. Kirk requested. But when he broached the matter to them he saw reason to change his mind. The men who had succeeded in causing a disturbance at distant Ballyvarty would certainly not neglect Castle Clare. They might take advantage of his absence to do worse things than merely keeping men from work. It would never do to leave the house without protection. He resolved to leave the police behind, and to start with two of his own people. He called to the servants and stable-boys.

"I want two of you lads to drive to Ballyvarty with me. The men are kicking up a row there. Who will come? There may be some hard knocks."

"I will, yer honour!" came from every one of them.

"You're bound to take me, sir," said Pewter, who had followed him to the yard. "I stood by ye in Vine Street, and I ain't going to leave you now."

Geoffrey was obliged to give way. He further selected Jerry and Dunn, as the oldest and steadiest of them all, and giving each of them a big shillelagh, he took the reins and drove out into the black wet night.

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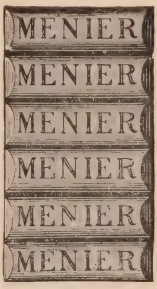

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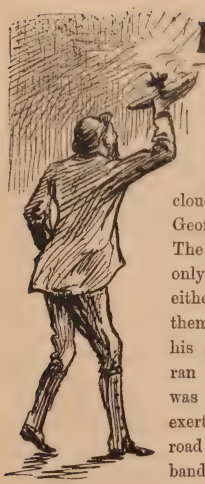
CHAPTER XXXI.

THE RESCUE.



IT WAS not exactly a pleasant drive—not quite the excursion in which an enthusiastic Irish patriot would have asked a newly-arrived, prejudiced Englishman to join. It was blowing hard from the west, and the wind brought up great heavy rain-clouds from the wild Atlantic. Right in Geoffrey's face the storm beat pitilessly. The night was closing in, and he could only just distinguish the black fences on either side, and the lighter road between them. The rain, which was blown up his sleeves, penetrated his waterproof, and ran down his neck in chilling rills. He was tired, too, bruised by his unwonted exertions, and hungry. At any turn of the road he might be stopped by an angry band of men who would, he knew, not hesitate to enforce their will by violence. The circumstances and surroundings—the horrible weather, the gloomy night, the countless dark acres of bleak hill and black bog right and left—were sufficient to make most men miserable. Everyone who had known Geoffrey in Bankshire or London—as a bumptious young man whose chief pleasures were to smoke, and drink, and play cards, would have said that this evening the youth must be truly wretched and miserable. Work he hated; and to-day he had worked hard and unceasingly. Any physical exertion he was unused to; to-day he had exerted himself from morning

till night. He liked his "meals reg'lar," and to-day he had lost his dinner. He liked his creature comforts; to-day he was wet, cold, and weather-beaten. As a logical consequence he ought to have been supremely unhappy, and with his large knowledge of bad language, ought to have cursed with a variety of expletives the country and the people, and finally, have declined to be bothered with them.

But, strange to say, he was not at all unhappy. He scarcely thought of his hunger, and if he occasionally uttered an anathema on the weather, this could scarcely be reckoned against him, as it was bad enough to make a saint swear. He forgot his aches and his bruised limbs. His whole mind was directed to Kirk's dilemma and the means of helping him out of it. For Geoffrey, who had never been a fool, but only a conceited ass, was quite sharp enough to see that if he had not quarrelled with the men in the morning Kirk would not have been besieged by their friends in the evening. So the difficulties and danger, if danger there was, were of his causing. The bitter thought crossed his mind: "Shall I never cease getting my friends into a mess?" But there came the consolatory mental reflection that this time at least, he had done his very best. It might be foolish to resist the will of the National League, but his heart rebelled at the thought of obeying it. Who had made the League the superior power in the land, the only power which men respected? Not the Queen, not Parliament, not the Courts of Law. For these, the last-mentioned particularly, Geoffrey entertained a very sincere respect, not unmingled with dread. But why should he yield obedience to a body supported by wily priests, greedy lawyers, self-seeking farmers, and ignorant peasants? Sorry as he was to have brought Mr. Kirk into an awkward mess, yet, reflecting over the day's doings, he could not see what wrong he had done. He thought that the Colonel would approve—providing only no harm came to Kirk, whom he loved. Aye! providing no harm came to Kirk! At this thought he whipped up poor Camel, who was already doing his best. He entertained terrible

ideas of Irish violence and bloodthirstiness, and feared the worst. He had yet to learn that the Irish are only violent when they know that they can be so with impunity; that their bloodthirstiness is easily quelled by timely firmness, and that, above all, they never attack any one unless they have a thousand to one the best of it.

Geoffrey entertained some fear lest the scoundrels should be lurking behind a hedge, ready to shoot at him as he passed. Occasionally he touched the loaded revolver he carried in his pocket, resolved to do his best if he were attacked. But there was no attack, nor any semblance of one. There was no sound audible except the roaring of the wind and the splashing of the rain. Occasionally he started as the telegraph wires overhead moaned in the storm. But his journey to Ballyvartey was not interrupted by any difficulty save that caused by the elements. At about nine o'clock they drove into the village. The streets were now no longer filled by an excited crowd, for the rain which Geoffrey had cursed, had in fact proved his most powerful auxiliary. Before the doors small groups of three or four were huddled, talking loudly, but seeking shelter. Only at one place was the street blocked, and that was before Hurley's door. Mr. Hurley lodged over the village grocer and postmaster, and in the same house two rooms were reserved for the use of the Castle Clare estate. One was a sort of parlour, where Mr. Crosby, the agent, was in the habit of taking lunch when visiting Ballyvartey; the other was an office. Both faced the road, and the crowd below were shouting and shrieking at these windows, though they were black and empty. Jerry and Dunn yelled at the people to make room for the dog-cart, while Pewter cursed them with loud and strong English oaths, and they opened a lane for it, sulkily enough, though they did not in the darkness see whom it conveyed. Not till Geoffrey pulled up at Hurley's door did the crowd suspect that help had arrived. They were looking forward to assistance from the National League, and were surprised that any should come to their enemies, who, they thought, were sufficiently

busy at Castle Clare. Somebody must have been watching inside, for the moment the cart stopped, the two solid gates which closed the yard swung back and admitted the whole party. The crowd made a rush to follow, but Pewter turned and faced them, while Jerry and Dunn, with a couple of men inside, were too quick for them, and banged the gates to before any one could force his way into the besieged fortress.

Kirk stepped forward, holding up a flaring dip to muster the new arrivals.

"Geoffrey!" he exclaimed in surprise and alarm. "What on earth made *you* come? Why did you not send the police?"

"I did not like to leave the house unguarded," answered Geoffrey: "and it would have taken too long to send over to Duneen for more men. Besides, I got you into the row, and I think it my business to try my best to get you out of it."

"What would the Colonel say?" exclaimed Kirk. "My dear fellow, it was not your business at all."

"Never mind that now," replied Geoffrey; "we will settle all that when we get home. The first thing we've got to do is to get out of this."

"I don't see how we can, very well," remarked Mr. Kirk. "There are certainly fewer men in the street than there were, but there are quite enough to drag us out of the dog-cart."

"Would they dare to do it?" asked Geoffrey.

"Surely you'd be kilt, yer honour," observed old Hurley.

"Dare?" said Tom. "Why they have broken every window in the front, calling on us to sack Driscoll, and cursing us in a manner which would put Billingsgate to the blush."

"That may be all noise," remarked Geoffrey. "I think their bark is worse than their bite."

"No doubt," assented Kirk; "but there are a couple of hundred of them and only half a dozen of us, and under such circumstances even an Irishman will fight. I think we had better wait for a couple of hours. They will go to bed by and bye."

"Or spend the night in the public-house, and get perfectly frantic with drink," answered Geoffrey. "No, Mr. Kirk. If you will come back with me, I'll go at once. If not, of course I must wait."

"What is the best chance, Hurley?" enquired Kirk.

"Well, yer honour knows best," replied the old man; "but me own opinion is that if the boys get to the whiskey, they will be mad. Maybe they will kill ye now, but I don't think they will. They are not bad boys."

To prove what good boys they were a howl or demoniacal yell came from the street, together with a shower of stones, which broke what little there was left of the front windows.

"Are you coming back with us, Hurley?" asked Tom.

"Shure I would not be safe amongst them," replied Hurley. "Yer honour would not lave me?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Kirk and Geoffrey together. "Of course not. Then get ready. We'll open the doors, make a rush, and let the two dog-carts follow us out. Then we will jump up and get home as fast as we can."

"Are there any papers or valuables in the house?" asked Kirk.

"There are," said old Hurley. These were collected and stowed in the dog-cart. Then the doors were locked and Hurley put the keys in his pocket—not because the intruders would hesitate about breaking open a door, but because such an act would be burglary, and therefore to be punished more severely.

"Have you the money, Kirk?" asked Geoffrey.

"Yes, what there is left. Some of the men were paid off before the row began. The ringleaders from Castle Clare had stirred them up, and they all refused to work on the estate if we did not discharge Driscoll. As I would not agree to this they said they would take their money and go. I intended paying them in the office, but Hurley here told me it would be dangerous to have a lot of them in the house, so I went downstairs and opened my bag on the doorstep. After a

while they began hustling me, and when I found that they would no longer take their wages quietly and go, but were hanging about and becoming insulting and dangerous, I just made a bolt of it and retired into the house. Then they began breaking the windows and yelling."

"How did you get the telegram sent?" asked Geoffrey.

"The telegraph office is in the grocer's shop: that's one blessing. But now are we all ready?"

"We are, sir," was the reply from the Irishmen.

"Aye, aye, sir," said Pewter.

"Very well, then. Geoffrey, you have a revolver? Right, so have I. Now you and I had better go first, while Pewter backs us up, and Hurley and his son open the gates. We will level the revolvers, and shout to them to stand back."

"They will stand back surely, never fear, when they see thim pistols," observed Hurley.

"Then," continued Kirk, "Denis will lead the Camel out, and Jerry my old nag, Pewter with the other two covering the flanks. As soon as the horses are out of the gate, you and I will jump into the first cart, and the others into the second."

This was agreed on, the men went to their posts, and when Kirk gave the word the gates were opened. The two stepped forward, their revolvers levelled. A light from the windows of a public-house opposite fell full upon them.

"Stand back!" cried Geoffrey. "If a man dares to come near me, I'll fire!"

"Bad luck to them!" cried some one in the crowd. "It's pistols they've got to murther us!"

The retreat was immediate. The crowd fell back, and formed a semicircle round the gate. The dog-cart was brought out.

"Make room!" cried Kirk. "Clear the street, or I'll fire!"

There was hooting and yelling, but no one stirred, for they saw that if they made more room, their prey would escape them.

"Maybe thim pistols is not loaded?" a youth ventured to remark.

"You will soon see!" exclaimed Geoffrey, raising his revolver, and firing one barrel over the heads of the crowd. The bullet struck a window opposite, and the glass fell with sounding fragments into the street.

The strategic movement to the rear was at once continued, and both conveyances were now able to draw clear of the gates. The most difficult task, however, had yet to come—for all to get into the carts and drive off while keeping the crowd at a respectful distance. Geoffrey and Kirk still faced them with their weapons. Kirk edged close to the young man.

"Just fall back a moment, Pewter," said Kirk, "and tell Hurley and his son to get into the second cart with Jerry. We will keep our revolvers at the blackguards meanwhile. When they are all on board, we can try and do the same."

The three obeyed instantly. But a few of the men had worked round to the rear of the carts, and these now stepped up.

"Ye're a coward, Clare of Castle Clare!" said one of them. "Sure it's with pistols and guns you'd fight us poor lads, and not with shillelaghs."

"Step back, man, or I'll shoot you down!" cried Kirk.

"I'm a better man than you or him, anyway," replied the fellow, insolently hustling up to Geoffrey. "I'd knock both of you down if it were not for the pistols."

"Would you, you pig?" exclaimed Geoffrey, turning round sharply. "Step back, you other boys, and make room. I'll knock this fellow down without the pistol."

Quickly he threw the revolver into the cart, which had now drawn up close to him.

"Well said, governor!" cried Pewter, who stood at the horse's head. The crowd wondered, and wondering, was silent.

"Don't be a fool!" shouted Kirk, alarmed.

"Will you go back, and make room for me to get into the cart?" said Geoffrey defiantly, to the great hulking, half-drunken ruffian, who was pushing his huge carcase between him and the dog-cart.

"I will not then, Clare. You're no better than I am," replied the man, approaching his red face far too close to Geoffrey's.

"Shall I knock him over the head, sir?" asked Pewter.

"Wait half a minute. Once more, for the last time, stand back, or you will be sorry for it," shouted Geoffrey.

But with a hideous, insolent grin, the man came up still nearer, and laid a heavy hand on Geoffrey's shoulder.

Quick as lightning, he sprang back, and letting out with his left hit the man heavily under the ear. Following this up with a right-hander straight from the shoulder, he smote the ruffian on the mouth. With a curse and a moan, the giant fell prostrate under the cart.

"Pull him out, boys, or I'll drive over him," cried Geoffrey, seizing the reins. "Jump in, Kirk. All right! off we go!"

Camel sprang forward. The men round the cart were busy with their fallen champion. The rest, either out of respect for Mr. Kirk's revolver, which was kept at full cock, and ominously levelled at them, or, perhaps, for more chivalrous reasons, did not attempt to interfere with the carriages. Only when they had put thirty yards between themselves and their pursuers, did the latter give vent to a hideous screech, which was at once followed by an ill-aimed shower of small stones.

In five minutes more they were on the lonely road with the wind now behind them, driving at the rate of twelve miles an hour towards Castle Clare.

CHAPTER XXXII.

VICTORY.

The victory was not entirely won, but a great advantage had been gained. The strikers had not succeeded in effecting their first object—that of obtaining the discharge of Driscoll—nor the second one, that of relieving Mr. Kirk of his money. With a good conscience, though a weary body, Geoffrey laid down at midnight—and seldom had he slept more soundly. But before six in the morning he was up again to start the work, and though on this day he did not consider it necessary to do much actual manual labour, he did not leave his post for more than a few minutes at a time, and never ceased encouraging his few faithful farm hands to persevere. Most of the neighbours came to call and express their sympathy. Some advised concession. But Mr. Long, the father of a family of blooming girls and strong boys, their nearest neighbour, offered actual help if it were wanted, for the matter was now being seriously taken in hand by the local branches of the League; and though actual outrages were stopped, the edict went forth that Castle Clare and its inhabitants should in future be "severely left alone." When François went into the village to do his usual marketing—such as it was, for the place was not well supplied with provisions—he was made to understand by grocers, butchers, and bakers, that they could not sell him anything. He returned very soon, and with a woe-begone face reported matters to Kirk. Pewter now again came to the front. Delighted with his own and his young master's prowess, which had lost nothing in the telling of it in the servants' hall, he volunteered to go by train to Kildonan to buy all that was immediately required, and to order supplies for the future.

"*Ma foi*," said François, "I am desolated, but I do not despair. The bread, we must make him in the Castle; we have

fowls, turkeys, eggs, and *conserves:* we will live; we shall live badly, very badly; but if it satisfies Monsieur Tom ——" and he shrugged his shoulders.

Kirk was not so easily consoled. "Now," he said to Geoffrey, "see what you have done! I wish to goodness you had left those scoundrels alone."

"I did nothing to them," Geoffrey urged, plaintively. "It is they who would not leave *us* alone."

"It's all the same," continued Kirk. "You would not sack that fool Driscoll, who, I dare say, is just as bad as any of them. We had a very disagreeable time last night, and I believe we have both caught severe colds; we had dinner at the perfectly ridiculous hour of eleven thirty, and of course I could not get to bed till two: though, by the bye," he interrupted himself, "it was a wonderful dinner, considering, was it not, Geoffrey?"

"I was so hungry, that I enjoyed it thoroughly," replied the young man.

"No one but François could have created such a repast, served up at a most eccentric hour, and within ten minutes of our coming in! Now poor François will never be able to cook such a dinner again!"

"Nonsense," said Geoffrey, almost impatiently.

"It was bad enough to have to fight one's way through a crowd of ruffians," Mr. Kirk went on, "worse still not to get anything to eat till midnight—but now, to be cut off from fresh provisions—that is worst of all!"

"Pewter is going to Kildonan for provisions," said Geoffrey. "I hope you will be supplied at least as well as ever."

"I hope so, indeed," sighed Mr. Kirk. "Geoffrey, I begin to agree with you at last. Ireland is a beastly country to live in."

"I don't think so now," said Geoffrey, quietly.

"You don't? Not after last night? Not now that the butcher won't sell us any meat, nor the baker bread?"

"No," answered Geoffrey, "I rather like it."

"Well, that beats me altogether," said Kirk. "You were

most unwilling to come; and you would never have come at all, I think, if it had not been for that unfortunate mistake at the Bancaster Ball. And now you are here, and have got into a regular series of disagreeables, you don't seem to mind it at all."

"Nor do I," said Geoffrey. "I rather like a row."

"So you do, I remember," exclaimed Kirk. "Well, it is more respectable than a difference with the magistrate at Vine Street, certainly: for this time you have the constables on *your* side."

Geoffrey blushed and bit his lips to stop a sharp reply. It was not kind of Kirk to remind him of his past folly. But Geoffrey was not the first to discover that a mistake a man commits sticks to him for years, even though he has redeemed it thrice over by many acts of gallantry, prudence, or wisdom.

Boycotting was not so bad after all. The inmates of Castle Clare were not helpless nor without means of defending themselves. They were within easy reach of the railway station; they had some faithful servants, and above all they had money. They were not, like most of the National League's victims, dependent on the local supplies for their very existence. That very day Colonel Neville arrived, and much to Geoffrey's delight, was perfectly satisfied with his ward's conduct. He at once wrote to Dublin and to London for sundry supplies. But a short and somewhat distorted account of the occurrence found its way into the London newspapers. This brought over Mellis at once. He announced his arrival by telegraph, and Geoffrey went to meet him at the station.

The two friends shook hands warmly. "I have brought the dog-cart," said Geoffrey. "I suppose you have only a portmanteau?"

"No, indeed!" exclaimed Mellis. "I would not come to you poor fellows with so little as that. Here, porter," he shouted, "take out those things."

The porter lugged three gun cases out of the carriage and

sundry smaller boxes, which looked very much as if they contained cartridges.

"But," said Geoffrey, "shooting has not begun yet, and there are very few partridges and no grouse. There won't be really anything worth going out for till the snipe come in! Why have you brought all these guns?"

"Surely they will come in useful," replied Mellis. "There is a Winchester repeating rifle that will break a bottle at three hundred yards to a certainty."

Geoffrey only stared in blank amazement.

"And," continued his friend, "there is a nice handy little Lancaster, which shoots wonderfully at short ranges. Besides, of course, I have a shot gun, and I've brought two hundred buckshot cartridges. How are you off for ammunition?"

"Oh, pretty well, I suppose," replied Clare, watching the porter pull one box after another out of the van, all of which Mellis claimed as his property. "But for goodness' sake, tell me what you have brought this arsenal for? I never wrote about any shooting except snipe and woodcock in the winter."

This time Mellis stared. "Why," he said, "I heard you were boycotted."

"So we are; but we don't want a lot of powder and shot for that! They are not firing at us morning, noon, and night, you know. In fact," he continued, "they have not fired at us at all yet."

"Have they not? But they will, you know; and I would not let an old pal like you, and a decent old Johnnie like the Colonel, just be potted like pigeons. I knew this infernal Government would not help you, so I thought I'd do my best. Now I suppose we cannot find a cart to take my things towards the Castle?"

"There is a good load, at any rate," observed Clare. "We will send for them by and bye. Just bring your bag for the present and jump in."

"No," remarked Mellis, "*I* will send for them. *I'm* not boycotted—yet," he added, significantly.

"My dear fellow, we will send one of our own carts. Don't be an ass. You chaps from England seem to think we are besieged."

"Well, so you are, very nearly. What?" exclaimed Mellis, as he saw the neat dog-cart and great strapping horse, with a small boy, unexceptionably got up, standing at his head, "is that your turn-out?"

"It is Colonel Neville's and mine jointly," answered Clare.

"Bless me! I thought you would not dare to show yourselves, and that you were obliged to walk about between a couple of bobbies, like we were when we got into that row. And have you kept any servants?"

"Plenty," said Clare: "more than we want."

"English, of course?"

"No, they are mostly Irish. I have Pewter, and the Colonel sent for a man from Bankshire to help with the hounds."

Mellis's surprise knew no bounds, and he was still further mystified when he found at Clare Castle all the comforts of an English mansion. His numerous boxes contained all sorts of provisions, wine, liqueurs, and even tinned vegetables. For, like many English people, he supposed that the operations of the telegraph, post-office, and railway were suspended for boycotted persons. He had yet to discover that a little money and a little pluck are all that is necessary to break the power of the National League, for it has no root in the hearts of the people.

A few days later Geoffrey received another visit from Father O'Leary. The wily priest no longer came to urge the young man to give way. He came, with his coadjutor, Father Bernard, thinner, more silky, and more wily than himself, to offer the inhabitants of the Castle a very large olive branch indeed. He had succeeded—at least so he said—in persuading the local branch of the League to withdraw their sentence against Castle Clare.

Colonel Neville and Geoffrey listened to him quietly. The Colonel was determined to let his ward finish the war he had so well begun. The young man's face flushed while Father O'Leary was talking, but he bided his time.

"The tradesmen," said the priest, "were misled. I have persuaded the League to allow them to supply you in future as before."

"I don't know the League. What is that body that pretends to pass sentences on unoffending people, and to tell them whom they can supply and whom not?"

"My dear young friend," said Father O'Leary, suavely, "the National League is a committee selected by the people. It represents the people's will."

"People's will be d—d!" replied Geoffrey, hastily. "I beg your pardon, sir—I forgot myself," he added, seeing Colonel Neville raise his hand. "I should have said that I know only the law of the land, as settled by Parliament: I can only acknowledge the decisions of the magistrates, and judges appointed by the Queen, and your League has no authority of the sort."

"You may think so, Mr. Clare, but——"

"No, Father O'Leary, I don't want to go into politics, and I won't quarrel. But do not speak to me of the League."

"We do not acknowledge it, but ignore it," said Colonel Neville.

"It has made itself felt," the younger priest ventured to observe.

"Not to us," replied Geoffrey. "Not to those who can defend themselves. We can do very well without the local tradesmen, or local labour."

"Certainly," said the Colonel.

Thus the priests found the ground cut from under them. They had come in order to withdraw the ban, and to obtain favours in return, or at least to be thanked, instead of which they found the enemy in so strong and lofty a position as to ignore them entirely.

"You will, of course," Father O'Leary ventured to say, "take your meat from Mahoney and your bread from Murphy again?" He addressed the Colonel, thinking to find him more conciliatory.

"I don't know," replied the Colonel; "my cook bakes better bread than Murphy, and Russell of Kildonan sends me better meat by rail than I can buy here."

"But they are very poor," the priest went on; "and the local landlords ought to support the local tradesmen."

"Your League should have thought of that before," said Geoffrey.

Father Bernard raised his hands deprecatingly. "Let as not talk of the League, dear Mr. Clare," he said. "They were wrong, no doubt."

"They were," said the Colonel and Geoffrey together.

"But you know we must forgive injuries," Father O'Leary continued. "You are both most generous and kind, and you belong to the great-hearted English race."

"The magnanimous," added Father Bernard.

"Blarney," whispered Neville, almost audibly.

"You would not visit your anger on these poor people?" said Father O'Leary. "Your greatness of mind will surely prevent your taking petty revenge."

"We have nothing to avenge," said Geoffrey, proudly.

"Will you take back the men who so foolishly left you?" asked Father Bernard.

Geoffrey could not repress an exclamation. "By Jove," he said, "that's a strong order."

Then the two priests described, in vivid colours, the misery and destitution of the labourers in the outlying hamlets, and more particularly near Ballyvartey. Geoffrey felt himself softening—the Colonel had practically given way before they began their story. At last the young man said:

"You acknowledge yourself beaten, then?"

The priests smiled but were silent.

"Well, we will think it over. We will not take back the ringleaders, but the poor fellows who were led away by them shall not suffer, anyhow. Good day, gentlemen."

Next day Father Bernard resigned the secretaryship of the Castle Clare branch of the League, and it shortly collapsed.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HIS FIRST FOX.

GEOFFREY'S conduct during this trying period, and his final triumph, created an unusual sensation in County Carberry was but natural. He was no longer allowed to refuse invitations, and sorely against his will, was dragged into the society of ladies. He had never liked the strict outward propriety of Bankshire, and his experiences there had not reconciled him to it, although he felt conscious of having outraged the feelings of his neighbours without any good excuse. He therefore feared Carberry society. It was very irksome to him to be obliged to keep a constant guard on himself, for he was himself unaware that a few months spent with Colonel Neville and Mr. Kirk had modified his own manners, and had toned down his style. The offensive and vulgar slang with which his conversation was formerly spiced had to a great extent disappeared. He had never used it from deliberate choice, but had acquired it from the "Johnnies" and "chappies" with whom he had associated. Now that he "Johnnies" and "chappies" were no longer about him, he un-

consciously began to acquire the tone of the Colonel and the Colonel's friends, so that when Mellis arrived, Geoffrey was surprised that he ever should have considered him one of the slowest of his friends. Mellis was slangy enough, but never vulgar, for his common sense had kept him from such friends as Captain Templar and his odious colleagues.

The Colonel took an opportunity of thanking Geoffrey in private for his steadfastness, but added to his thanks a few words, in which he pointed out how easy it was for them to resist outrage, since they had many faithful servants, money, and credit. It was, said he, a very different matter for isolated farmers or landlords, at a distance from all railways, with but a small establishment and slender means. So, after all, the praise of his neighbours did not spoil Geoffrey, but only strengthened him in his new career of hard work and sensible enjoyments.

He began, too, to take an interest in the hounds, stimulated by the joy and excitement produced on the arrival of the pack which the Colonel had succeeded in collecting. They, too, were of various sorts and sizes, though scarcely as "mixed" as Tom Kavanagh's. They came in instalments. First were two couple from Sir Ralph Branscombe, drafted from the Bankshire because they were too slow for that flying country. Then came some from the north of Ireland, big-headed dogs, with good shoulders and large feet, but apparently short of quality. The next consignment consisted of half a dozen puppies from Galway, intelligent and amiable little beggars, promising well, but without any manners at all. Mr. Germaine had scoured his neighbourhood, and had sedulously called in reply to advertisements in the *Field*. He sent over a very handsome lot, much better looking than any Colonel Neville had been able to purchase. Their breeding was unexceptionable—on paper—and though several were rather slack in the loins, they all showed signs of quality. Even Geoffrey remarked that they were far superior to the Irish hounds.

"They look like it," said the Colonel. "We must see what they are at work. I'm much afraid that they will be a little wild."

During all these weeks Geoffrey had been riding about the

estate, and had gradually acquired a certain amount of confidence in his horses and in himself on their backs. It was impossible to be always driving, and when Mellis came, the example of that youth, who "larked" over every fence that came in his way, proved infectious, and more than once Geoffrey found himself jumping for the mere fun of the thing, which he would not have dreamt of six months ago. Now the hounds had arrived, the young men began work for the forthcoming season in earnest. Neither the Longs, nor the Desmonds, nor the Barrys, allowed them to neglect the "dogs" as they were persistently called. For many years there had been no hunting in Carberry, and the prospects of its revival was welcomed by all. For a short time Colonel Neville feared that the war between Geoffrey and the League would result in the hounds being stopped or poisoned, but the further they extended their daily rides, and the more enquiries they made, the more were the whole party reassured on that point. Not the landlords only, but the farmers and the labourers welcomed the "dogs" with uproarious delight whenever a waving stern was seen or a deep note heard. First Geoffrey and Mellis, on the Colonel's advice, took out a few couples only at a time, and walked them round the park. Then they extended their walks to the quieter lanes in the neighbourhood, still taking only a few. As the summer waned they became bolder, and ventured on riding out with the greater part of the pack. The kennels became an endless source of amusement. Geoffrey took to feeding the hounds himself, and discovered a seedy old red coat which had been worn by Colonel Neville when he was only a subaltern. Donning this, he trotted forth in the dewy mornings of August, and felt proud as a peacock when the hounds burst out after his horse's heels, and he turned into the green pastures of the park to exercise them. Mellis, who had agreed to stop over the season, volunteered to act as first whip, and Mike, a small boy of diminutive stature but advanced age, was the second. Occasionally they were joined by the Colonel, who however purposely refrained from interfering more than was absolutely necessary. Often Colonel Long, a tall, thin, sinewy man, with

the upright carriage of an old soldier, trotted over on the first horse he could lay his hands on—a three year old out of the paddock, or an old mare from the plough, or his daughter's cob —and accompanied them to admire the beauties. Visits from the Desmonds and the Barrys were frequent about lunch time; they came not for lunch, but to look at the dogs. Many were the anxious consultations between Geoffrey and the neighbours as to the coverts and the foxes in them. Some assured him that the country was alive with foxes, and that there were so many, that hounds would not be able to run one. Others declared that the lurchers had destroyed every fox, and that none at all would be found. Others again admitted that there would be no want of "game," but added that nobody could ride over Carberry, which was the most difficult and cramped country in the world. Many people said that the party from Castle Clare would be the only ones to hunt, that no one else could afford to keep hunters, and that the whole thing would be a failure.

There was some grain of truth in all or nearly all of these prophecies. No doubt the country would be a bad one to ride over, and more than once Geoffrey, scanning the surrounding valleys from some hill-cover, had wondered how on earth horses and men on them would ever get across them, even if hounds did so. Also, there was poverty in the land, and the number of trained hunters in the neighbourhood was very limited, while lurchers unfortunately abounded, and the "corner boys" from Kildonan and other places, spent Sundays and holidays in coursing rabbits, hares, and foxes, without any regard to the laws of trespass or any other laws. Still the four men at the Castle kept each other's spirits up till the first morning of cub-hunting dawned. It had been carefully kept secret. Geoffrey, who was generally too much inclined to talk, was silent as the grave this time because the secret was his own, and he feared to make a mess of hunting the hounds. The meet should not, at any rate, be a public one, so only the Colonel and Jerry and the head groom knew the hour and place fixed, and at five o'clock on a fine September morning, just as the first rays of the sun peeped above

the horizon, Geoffrey tumbled out of bed, and yelled out to Mellis to awake likewise. It was a proud moment when he turned out of the avenue on the same Kildare who had carried him in the great run over the Bancaster Vale, when he had fallen by the way and had ridden home to find a general explosion. His feelings were now very different. Round his horse, tumbling over each other in the ecstasy of their delight, were eighteen couple of hounds, yelping, barking, sniffing about, and testifying in every possible way to their pleasure in seeing the red coats and hearing the horn. By his side was the Colonel, spruce and smiling. Behind him were Mellis and Tom Kirk, the latter on the redoubtable cob. Far in the rear was tiny Mike, with a wide grin on his little yellow face, endeavouring with more or less of success, to keep the hounds in order. Above his head the tall trees closed their still leafy branches, cutting out jagged patterns of bright blue. On the right, between the stems, the meadows covered with a light autumn mist were just visible. It was a perfect morning—made for sport and for the enjoyment of nature alike.

But Geoffrey's pride was of short duration. Scarcely had they emerged from the avenue gate, when a puppy—one of the Galway lot—rushed at a country girl, who, earlier than usual, was plodding along the footpath. She was shoeless, and her shapely, though not very clean ankles, possessed a magical attraction for the Irish hounds. For scarcely had the puppy given tongue, when the whole pack clustered round poor Norah, barking loudly. The first impulse of an Irish peasant woman when alarmed, is to pull her black cloak over her head, and this Norah did. But the hounds bayed still, and she quickly scrambled up the "ditch," *i.e.*, the high bank by the side of the road. There stood Norah quickly lifting up one leg after the other, and as rapidly putting it down again, while the whole pack surrounded her, giving tongue as if she had been a stag at bay.

Geoffrey blew his horn, which he found rather difficult, and only produced a discordant squeak, to which the pack paid no attention.

"Lave the girl alone, ye divels."

"Git away, ye divils, lave the girl alone!" yelled little Mike in his shrill treble, cutting at the offenders with his whip, while the Colonel dealt out blows freely, and the roadside was soon cleared. But the worst sinners bolted over the bank, and attacked Norah from the rear, where, no doubt, they imagined themselves safe from punishment, as the bank was a high one, and was further guarded by a wide ditch towards the fields. In his capacity as first whip, it was Mellis' duty to reduce the malcontents to order, and ably did he perform the duty, for without any hesitation he put the "Camel" at the bank, topped it, and with a wide spring, landed in the field beyond. Many hounds were in the boggy ditch, where he did not follow them, some scrambling up the bank at Norah's legs, and threatening mischief. He jumped off his horse, and regardless of mud, lashed at them right and left, Camel wisely munching the sweet grass meanwhile. At last, with many squeaks and cries, the pack raised the siege, and poor Norah was released. But she remained standing on her fortress long after Mellis had found his way out by a friendly gate, and she gazed in terror after the sportsmen till they had turned a distant corner.

Mike's post was now no sinecure. The hounds which had received the severest punishment—not, perhaps, the most guilty—hung back, and were with difficulty persuaded to join the pack. Others, conscience-stricken, skirted, while others, still uncorrected, ranged the fields widely on either side, and apparently thought it their business to quarter the ground thoroughly. There was much whipping and yelling before the hounds were again well together, nor would this have been effected, had it not been for the timely appearance of Jerry, who took a horse out "just for exercise" after his masters had started, and caught them up on the road. Jerry could manage Irish hounds better than the others. He used strange language, but they seemed to understand it. At last they reached the wood which it was intended to draw, and here Geoffrey's work began in earnest.

"Eugh in, my beauties!" cried he, waving his hand. "Eugh n, eugh in!"

The hounds did not take the slightest notice. Some stared at him, others sniffed about promiscuously; several took a trot into the next field, the puppies hung about the horses' heels. Not one entered the thick covert.

Colonel Neville sat still on his horse, waiting. Geoffrey was master of the fox hounds, and it was Geoffrey's business to get the hounds into covert.

"Get in," cried Geoffrey again, working his arms like a pump-handle. "Get in, Stormer! Eugh in, Milkmaid! Hya, ya, ya, ya! Eugh in, eugh in!"

Milkmaid, hearing her name, looked into Geoffrey's face, and evidently expected a biscuit. Stormer came back from the heels of Tom Kirk's cob to the heels of Geoffrey's horse. Dauntless, one of the old Bankshire hounds, moved to the edge of the wood, but seeing a thorny bramble, of which the appearance was repellent, retired again to a distance.

"D—n the hounds," cried Geoffrey, getting cross, "they won't go into covert at all. What shall I do?"

"Get in yourself," said Colonel Neville, briefly.

It was not the sort of place that a man would choose to ride through for mere pleasure. There was much thorny underwood, there were many brambles of prickly gorse, and the shoots of the young trees were low and overhanging.

"A fellow can't ride into that place," said Geoffrey, looking in vain for a convenient hole.

"I am afraid you will have to get off and walk in," said the Colonel.

There was a slight smile on Tom Kirk's face. Geoffrey might have hesitated if it had not been for that smile. But seeing the smile, which would soon augment into a sneer, and fearing ridicule above everything, Geoffrey jumped off, threw his reins to Jerry, and manfully plunged into the briars. Soon his horn resounded from the wood, squeaky still, though less squeaky than before. Now the Colonel helped him. Cheering the old Bankshire hounds to the horn, they soon dashed into cover, and the example proved infectious. One after another followed the old

ones, and the majority of the skirters were urged in by Mike, Mellis, and a little whipcord. Only a few puppies and some of Mr. Germaine's contingent still hung back, and neither persuasion nor force could induce them to face the dark recesses of the wood.

"Hunting is not all beer and skittles," muttered Geoffrey, as he stumbled over the roots of the trees, and brushed through the envious brambles. "Dash it, I hope there are cubs here. But how the deuce am I to get out again and find my horse, Heaven only knows."

At last old Ranger gave tongue, and Colonel Neville swore that he recognised the broad Bankshire accent. "It's very different," said he, "to the brogue of those Galway hounds. Hunt him up, Ranger, good dog! Rout him out! Good dog, good dog; hi at him Ranger!"

There was a short silence; then Ranger spoke again, and then a loud chorus told that there was at least one cub in the wood, if not more. Round and round the covert they hunted, almost in silence, then again with loud music. Slowly the men outside followed the receding sounds, and returned again slowly, fearful lest they should head him. But the cub would not break cover. Even the puppies had now joined their companions, and none remained outside except two of Mr. Germaine's beauties, by far the handsomest of the pack. One was rolling on the grass as if the noise in the wood were no concern of his, the other raised his head occasionally, and looked inquisitive, but he did not like being pricked by thorns, and evidently thought that the game was not worth the candle.

"It is clear enough why Germaine bought those brutes so cheap," said the Colonel. "They won't hunt at all."

For nearly an hour the work in the wood continued, till suddenly there was a loud yell of "Gone away!" from Mellis, who was posted at the far corner. The cry was taken up by the others, and Jerry made the best of his way forward with his young master's horse. Then a hound—Rattler it was, Ranger's brother—emerged, busy feathering, and then Bravo gave tongue. Soon

a number spoke to him, and broke away over the stubble field, in which oats were still stacked. Then at last Geoffrey came out, hot and flushed, his face scratched with the brambles and his breeches torn. Almost breathless, he jumped on his horse, and cantered over the stubble after the fast retreating hounds. "Let him go first," cried the Colonel, as Mellis rushed past on Camel, and the young man obeyed so far as to take a pull at his horse. Abreast, he and Geoffrey took the bank in front of them. The latter forgot all about the jump in his anxiety to be with the hounds, and once more very nearly fell over his horse's head, but, quickly recovering, he came up in time to see the hounds throw up their heads in the next plough. He was just raising his horn to his mouth to cast them, when the Colonel said: "Better leave them alone for a bit, Geoff. There's a good scent, but I think the cub has doubled back. They hardly ever run straight at first, you know."

True enough; for Babbler took it up on the right, and Ranger spoke to it; and away they went in a line parallel to the wood. Another jump—a big one this time—which scarcely moved Geoffrey in his saddle, for he was prepared for it, and then a spin over a big grass field, and a sharp bend to the right again.

"Beg your honour's pardon, but sure he's gone back!" exclaimed Jerry. "I saw him meself, while your honour was laping. A pretty cub, too, your honour."

But the hounds were close to his brush. Geoffrey pushed his way through the brambles, and, sticking to his horse, he and Mellis and Jerry followed as well as they could. There were some short turns in the underwood, a burst of music followed by a shrieking chorus, and then silence. A loud whoop resounded next, and a real Celtic screech from Mike's treble.

Five minutes later Geoffrey emerged from the wood, torn, flushed, and bleeding, but proud and happy. For in his hand high above his head, he swung his

FIRST FOX.

* * * * *

"You don't seem to mind hunting so much now, sir," said Pewter, as he helped his master to remove his torn, dirty clothes.

"It's capital fun," replied Geoffrey. "There is nothing I like better."

"Well, sir, his lordship always called it the sport of kings," remarked Pewter, sententiously. "But it's ruination to your clothes, sir, and no mistake. Begging your pardon, but I don't think you'll ever be able to wear them breeches again."

He held out the torn garments at arm's length.

"You may keep them yourself, if they're of any use to you."

"Thank you, sir," said Pewter.

"*I* call it capital fun, too," said Pewter to himself, as he closed the door on Geoffrey splashing in his bath, "if I gets a pair of breeches every time. They'll do up as good as new, they will."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A GRAND HUNT.

"You'll be coming over to see my dogs on Wednesday, Mr. Clare?" asked Denis Kavanagh, when he was taking leave after Geoffrey's first regular hunting day.

"Oh, yes," replied the latter, "we will come."

"We'll show you a fine hunt, I hope," continued Denis. "Ye did very well to-day with thim dogs of yours, Mr. Clare, and you're a sportsman I'm glad to know. But it's a rough country here. It's casht you must come for a good hunt."

"Where do you meet on Wednesday?" enquired Colonel Neville

"We're meeting on this side, to please you gentlemen," replied Denis. "And I hope the ladies will come, too," he added, seeing a whole car-full of Longs drive up to afternoon tea; "it is only ten miles to Garthally, and a good road entirely."

"I wish you would let me lend you some dry clothes, Mr. Kavanagh," said Colonel Neville. "It's been showery all day, and yours must be very damp. You have a long drive before you!"

"Not at all, not at all," replied Denis. "A drop more whishkey, if you plase. Thank you. And may I ask you for a fuse? Thim's useful things, thim fuses."

A 'fuse was a fixed light' or vesuvian—an invention which had highly pleased Mr. Kavanagh more than once during the day. Struggling to light a wooden match behind a hedge, in storms of wind and rain, which were too frequent for hunting to be very agreeable, Geoffrey and Colonel Neville had come to his rescue with the miniature dumb-bell, so useful to sportsmen. The ladies now entered the room, and Mr. Kavanagh quickly swallowed his whiskey, for he was not quite at his ease in their society. In his stained pink, with his frizzled hair and weather-beaten face, lighted by two small keen but kindly grey eyes, he

was the very type of the old style of Irish hunting man, now, alas, almost extinct. Entirely regardless of appearance, his dress was designed only for rough work. His tops, now wet and splashed, were of the darkest brown, which required but little cleaning, or at any rate did not get it. His boots were never shiny, nor his buttons bright. His breeches were mud-coloured corduroys, and he wore under his coat an old knitted and sleeved waistcoat. Regardless of wind and wet, without waterproof apron or coat, he would ride twenty miles to hounds, or, as he was doing to-night, drive his old pony twenty miles home from them. Now he cut up some twist on the ball of his thumb, filled his short pipe, once more shook hands all round, and climbed into his little cart. When he was once on board, he took a few puffs and turned the bowl of his pipe down to keep the wet out, then called out to his pony, "Go on, ye divil," and waving his right hand in salutation disappeared down the avenue.

Kirk made himself very useful to the ladies. At afternoon tea he was a capital host, as his mind was pre-occupied neither by anxiety as to the dishes to come, nor by grief of failures past, nor by criticism of the dish being eaten. Tea, buttered toast and cake were simple joys enough, though, in his opinion, destructive to the appetite. But they left his mind open to other impressions, and while Colonel Neville and Geoffrey were rapidly getting rid of their wet hunting clothes, he entertained the Longs pleasantly. He suggested that if the next Wednesday should be fine they should all drive over to Gartbally to see Mr. Kavanagh's hounds, a scheme which at once gained Mrs. Long's and her daughter's approval.

Fortune favoured them. The 4th of November was one of those days uncommon in England at such a season, and still more uncommon on the moist coast of Ireland. There was bright sunshine in a blue sky, and a gentle southerly breeze. The morning was cool, but by the time they reached the meet they could have fancied themselves in spring. Gartbally was a tiny hamlet on the main road, in a deep valley: on one side rose a steep rocky hill, rough sheep pasture, dotted with clumps of gorse; on the other a large wood of birch, beech,

hazel, and dwarf oak. The beautiful autumnal tints of leaves had not yet faded: the bracken and undergrowth were still thick and green; the rushes which fringed the little brook by the wood-side had scarcely changed colour. Many equestrians on various animals, but more foot people, were waiting for Denis Kavanagh, who appeared on his old dun within five minutes of the appointed time, but, according to his usual custom, at once proceeded to throw the hounds into cover without any delay for 'coffee housing.' He had no whip with him; he himself acted as master, huntsman, and first-whip, trusting that one or other of the field would help him to keep the hounds together if necessary. Under such circumstances it was no easy task to draw a thick covert, and, in fact, Denis made no attempt to do so seriously. He jumped off his horse, which he gave to one of the numerous 'boys' to hold, and walked in, blowing his horn. He did not object to a good third of the pack remaining outside, shirking their work. The 'boy' who was supposed to hold the old dun, at once got on his back and tore up and down the road at a gallop, much to the undisguised envy of the other ragged lads. Colonel Neville, curious to see the hunting of the pack he had refused, crossed the brook by a bridge and followed a narrow winding path through the wood, where he was soon joined by Geoffrey and Mellis. Occasionally they saw a hound working steadily, but most of them followed Kavanagh in Indian file.

"There's no fox here," said Denis, emerging from the thick covert. "Thim dogs would have found him before now."

"But they have not been half through the covert yet," objected Colonel Neville.

"If a fox was in the wood at all, its Warner and Woodbine would have told us. That's he, Artless!" he cried out. "That's he! try him, Artless, good lass."

Artless was certainly feathering with more vigour than the rest of them. She worked as if she meant business. Slowly she pushed her way forward, not leaving a yard of ground untouched. Slowly and with much trouble the men pushed on behind her, all dismounted and scrambling over rocks, down steep gullies, up wet banks and under jealous overhanging branches. It was

not long before the Englishmen were hot and tired, but Denis strode onwards undaunted. At last a weak note came from Artless, who was still alone, and only then did the master sound his horn to summon the other hounds. A few only obeyed, and Artless alone gave tongue, working now in circles, and then again pushing slowly forward.

Wiping their flushed faces they finally emerged in an open glade, where several narrow rides converged. Here they found Warren, young Long, and a few more sportsmen from Kavanagh's country.

"They are on a fox," said Geoffrey, joyfully: "see, that hound is hunting him!"

"Artless," replied Warren, with a sneer, but in a low tone: "why, she would speak if a fox had passed here yesterday fortnight."

"The deuce she would! what a nose she must have!"

"Nose! yes: but she always spoils a hunt. I wish you would get Denis to try forward, Colonel Neville," added Warren, "the fox is sure to be forward, and I expect he is after leaving the wood."

Colonel Neville mildly suggested that as they had now been scrambling after Artless for nearly an hour without apparently getting any nearer to their fox, it was expedient to make a forward cast.

"Not at all," replied Denis. "Artless would never deceive us. There's a fox been here this morning. Hark! there's old Solomon speaking! Hark to him. That's he, Solomon, that's he!"

But Solomon seemed sorry that he had spoken at all. His wise face, raised to Denis Kavanagh, told plainly that he had been hasty and repented his mistake. At any rate, he did not repeat it. So the master trudged on after Artless, supported in his opinion by an occasional slight cry from a puppy, and the others now stuck to the paths, having had enough of hunting on foot. But if the hounds did not draw the covert effectually their duties were vicariously performed by the foot people, who tramped through the thickest parts of the covert and left no bramble and

no dell untouched, making their ragged coats still more ragged, and regardless of stones, thorns, or bog-holes. No fox could have faced the clamour, and after another hour of it Denis was reluctantly forced to leave Gartbally, swearing, however, that Artless was right, and that the fox must have sneaked away unperceived.

Solomon seemed sorry he had spoken

It was a long job to collect the hounds, nor was the pack complete when they at last moved on; but Denis did not mind leaving a couple or two in the wood. He opined that they would find their way back to the kennels all right before evening—as no doubt they did. It was a pleasant ride to the next covert, and they went at a good pace, and had a little mild jumping, which pleased the ladies. Creaghnore was a very different place to Gartbally. A substantial square house in beautiful but neglected gardens, surrounded by fine park-like pastures. On three sides of them was a narrow belt of covert, fine tall

beeches and gnarled oaks, with patches of underwood, called in Ireland 'a screen.' Before the last horseman had entered the pastures, before the last hound had plunged into the covert, there was a chorus from the bulk of the pack, which suddenly inspired all like an electric shock.

"Hold hard!" shouted the Colonel, seeing the younger men press forward. "Give them time."

And in another minute the hounds swept out of the wood, all beautifully together like a flock of pigeons. In a great curve they flew across the first grass field; and now all thought they were in for a gallop, as Denis Kavanagh emerged crying "Forrard! forrard! That's right! that's right!"

But, alas! the joy was of short duration. The hounds ran with loud music to the high bank which bounded the field, then there was sudden silence and a spreading right and left like a fan; then again they united, and a few scrambled over, only to return again to their companions. Soon all collected round one spot in the bank, a place covered with thick brambles. Denis Kavanagh jumped off his horse, and a dozen volunteers helped him to investigate. There was a hole inside the brambles, a hole running down into the bank.

"He's in there! he's gone to ground!" cried Denis. "Whoop!"

"Let's dig him out!" suggested young Long. "There are too many foxes about, and we ought to kill him."

"He may give us a gallop if the hounds are kept back," suggested Neville. "He ought to be easy to get at, for it is only an earth bank, after all."

"Why didn't they stop the earth?" asked Geoffrey.

"There are too many," replied Warren. "It would take a regiment."

Men were sent off to fetch spades, for the terriers produced on the spur of the moment would not go into the earth. It was a bright, sunny place, this; the very spot for a picnic. Soon most of the men dismounted, and the grass was so dry and warm that in a few minutes they were reclining on the slope, lazily flicking their whips to keep the hounds off the hole, or

talking to the ladies, while waiting for the necessary tools. When they arrived there was a revival of excitement. It was difficult to keep the hounds back, and Kavanagh's anxiety waxed greater with every moment.

"How can we get out of this place?" asked Geoffrey, remounting.

"There's a tremenjious wall all round the screen," answered Long, "but it's just jumpable over there to the right; the fox is sure to go for Gartbally, where we have come from."

"Ride straight for Gartbally," added Warren, "that will be his line, you may depend upon it. I expect it is the very fox that Artless spoke to this morning."

The impatience increased, and even the ladies were in a tremour of excitement. By dint of much exertion, Colonel Neville had kept the people back from the other side of the bank, so that the fox should have a fair chance. The hounds were baying and struggling, pushing their noses into the earth and sadly interfering with the work. At last there was a yell. "Gone away!" shricked some one, perhaps prematurely, perhaps not, for in full view of the assembled field there bolted out of the earth a small, undersized rabbit, with the whole pack in full cry after him.

* * * * *

"Yes, sure," said Mr. Kavanagh, when the hounds had at last been whipped off, "they will hunt any sort of game. They are good dogs entirely. Is there no hare about here as we can't find a fox?"

And the day wound up with a good gallop after a mountain hare.

"But fancy fifty people on horseback and all that crowd wasting an hour to dig out a bunny," said Geoffrey on their way home.

"It's nothing strange in this country, it appears," answered Mellis, reflecting.

"They will hunt any sort of game."

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CHAPTER XXXV.

VISITORS.

"WOULD you like to have a few friends over from England?" Colonel Neville said to Geoffrey one morning, after they had been talking over matters connected with the tenants.

"Whom?"

"Well, I was thinking of inviting the Germaines. He is very fond of snipe and cock shooting, and he seldom gets a chance at either in Bankshire. Now we cannot say much for our partridges, but we have certainly a good lot of wood-cock, and as to the snipe, a man can bag any quantity if he can only shoot them."

Now for some few weeks—ever since the successful opening of the hunting season, in fact—Geoffrey had been cherishing the wish that some of the Bankshire folks should hear of his doings. He was, in fact, anxious to regain his character as a rider and a gentleman. In both capacities they had a poor opinion of him in Bankshire; with the Carberry people, on the contrary, he had acquired great *prestige* by his conduct during the boycotting, and they were inclined to admire everything he did and said. What if he sat his horse loosely, and had an occasional fall? It was a queer country to ride over, and there were very nasty jumps.

Besides, he was always back in the saddle directly. What if he was sometimes unable to control the hounds? It was a scratch pack, and all were glad to help. What if his judgment was often at fault? He was a stranger in the country, and could not be expected to know the run of the wild mountain-fox. In short, Geoffrey was regarded in Carberry through rose-coloured spectacles by all except the wire-pullers of the National League, who, however, concealed their hatred under a courteous exterior. The young man knew this well, and was happy in proportion, the memory of past misfortunes checking undue elation. But he was not entirely happy, and felt that two events must happen to make him so. One was that he should re-establish his character in Bankshire; the second that he should have a chance of proving his gratitude to the Colonel. Now the latter's suggestion —that the Germaines should be asked over at once, while their many boys were still at school and while the snipe were still plentiful—was a favourable opportunity for realising his first wish. It would not be half so jolly and unconventional when the Germaines would be at the Castle; he would have to mind his *p*'s and *q*'s more than he need with the Longs and the Moores; but he would, he thought, soon get used to it, and it was quite worth while to put up with a little inconvenience for the sake of his object. Nor was this object entirely a selfish one; for Geoffrey knew how sorely his guardian had felt that snubbing by the Bankshire people, and how rejoiced he would be if the young man's character in the county were restored. He therefore acquiesced in the Colonel's suggestion not only with a good grace, but with alacrity. The invitation was despatched, and promptly accepted; Mr. and Mrs. Germaine and Lucy duly arrived at the appointed time, and even Geoffrey's sensitiveness failed to detect in their manner any trace of coldness. They all greeted Geoffrey as their host, as indeed he was; for the place was his, and it was only by an unusual clause in the will of his relative that he had not already the legal management of it. The first evening, which he had feared most, passed over very pleasantly. The ladies were full of curiosity about the Carberry and

Irish ways, and their Bankshire news contained no sting. After dinner Mr. Germaine followed Mellis and Geoffrey into the smoking-room, though his wife and daughter did not, like the jolly Long girls, join them there and take a whiff of a small cigarette. While Mr. Germaine was all impatience to try the bogs for snipe and the hills for wood-cock, his daughter was equally keen on going out with "Mr. Clare's hounds." Geoffrey had determined not to join the shooting party. He could not shoot at all yet, and he knew it; wherefore he determined that Mr. Germaine should, at any rate, have no funny tales of his want of skill with the gun to take back to Bankshire. Hence he was quite free to ride with Lucy, who had brought her habit; nor had Mr. Germaine forgotten his pink, for there were horses enough at the castle to mount him, even though the Colonel's grey, Hailstorm, did not at first take very kindly to the Irish banks, as he went at them too fast and tried to fly them. But a tumble or two in boggy places soon taught the sensible animal how to negotiate "ditches," and though he was far too much of a galloper for the Carberry hounds, the Colonel thought he was about good enough to win a Hunt Cup at the races which they all hoped to get up after the hunting season.

When, on the morning after the Germaines arrival, Lucy came down to breakfast in her habit, ready to ride "Obadiah," whom the Colonel recommended to her as the safest mount in the stable, it suddenly struck Geoffrey that she was a very pretty girl; and very soon it struck Lucy that Geoffrey was much improved. He wore a scarlet coat as a matter of course, and the coat seemed to suit him, which none of his hunting clothes ever did in Bankshire. He had lost the cubbish look which had formerly spoilt his not unhandsome features. A light brown moustache on his upper lip and a soft beard on his chin were now distinctly visible to the naked eye. Though busy discussing what cover they should draw first, he at once stopped the conversation when Lucy and her mother came in, and devoted himself to looking after them. Did they take tea or coffee? Would Mrs. Germaine try a grey mullet which had been

sent them from the Ballyvartey river—the best for mullet in Ireland? Had they been comfortable, and not been disturbed in the night by the neighbourhood of the kennels? He hoped they would have good sport: the morning was promising, but there were not many foxes about, and he was by no means sure of getting a real straight-backed one. Thus he rattled on, endeavouring to provide for the ladies' wants and to amuse them; and thus he produced, unwittingly, a far better impression than ever before. For his self-consciousness had gone, and he was not thinking of himself, his coat, and his appearance, but of them and how he should make their stay pleasant, not because he had any special reason to be fond of any of them, but to please Colonel Neville, and because he took pride in the hounds, and horses, and the whole beautiful place, which to people fresh from cold Bankshire, looked even more beautiful than it really was.

"They were not very kind to me in Bankshire," thought he, "but it served me right, for I behaved like a beast: I'll try to make up for it now."

The meet was not distant, but they had to ride the full length of the village of Castle Clare. This was always an ordeal; for, although the hounds were now far steadier than in September, the small butchers' stalls, the open cottage-doors, the cocks and hens, and the numerous odorous back yards, always proved an almost irresistible attraction to some of the puppies. One of Mr. Germaine's contributions, Seaman, was a terrible sinner in another way. His hostility to cats was such that he could not pass one quietly. Geoffrey would have drafted him before now if he had not been just as keen after a fox as after a cat, and one of the quickest hounds in the pack, swift to run and swift to turn, and almost the only one of the scratch lot bought, that was thoroughly successful. All went well in the village, and Geoffrey breathed again. He was now able to look after his friends, and Mr. Germaine joined him at his request to look at and talk over the hounds.

To the door of the last cottage, a quarter of a mile beyond the

village, came the elderly owner, a "lone woman," to see the gay procession pass and to wish them luck. Unfortunately the old woman possessed a cat, and pussy was arching her back, raising her tail, and gently rubbing her fur against her mistress' scanty skirts. Geoffrey did not notice the cat, but a squeak and a yell after he had passed the cottage told him too clearly what had happened. He would not look back, for he feared the anger of the old lady, and was, troth to tell, rather ashamed that his hounds should not be kept in better order. He pretended not to have heard anything.

"Look, Mr. Clare," suddenly cried Lucy, riding up to him; "there's something in the mouth of that black and white hound."

There was indeed something, and that something was causing a disturbance among the hounds. Mike was a long way behind, probably chivvying some unfortunate puppy out of a back-yard; Mellis was busy talking to Mrs. Germaine and neglecting his duties, or surely it never could have happened that Seaman should trot solemnly along with an unfortunate cat in his mouth, held crosswise, while Milkmaid, and Festive, and Babbler were all growling and snatching at his prey, and carrying off bits of fur or morsels of cat at every snatch.

"D—n that brute," muttered Geoffrey. "Drop it, Seaman," he shouted, "drop it, sir;" accompanying his orders with a swinging cut, which, however, was too vigorous to be well aimed. Another dose of whip-cord was required before Seaman unwillingly dropped his prey. Meanwhile Mike had come up.

"Pick up that cat, and throw it over the wall," said Geoffrey, pointing to the high wall facing the road; and, blowing his horn, he trotted on to get the hounds beyond temptation.

"What a cruel hound!" exclaimed Lucy.

"What an unruly beast," said Mr. Germaine.

"It is one of the lot you were good enough to send us," said Geoffrey politely to the latter. "We have not been able to break him of that habit yet."

Thus the tables were turned, and Mr. Germaine felt himself

quite as guilty as Seaman. The croakers would have been discomfited to see the bright crowd which welcomed the Castle Clare party when they arrived at Holy Hill. There were the Kearneys, and the Longs—Colonel Long on a sharp old cob, and his son on a well-bred chestnut, while a lot of girls were crowded on an Irish car and the rest of them walking. Dr. Casey, the National Leaguer, was there, on a thoroughbred black mare, whose speed was greater than her discretion; and his brother, almost a professional hard-rider, on a roan. Denis Kavanagh had come over: a far distance was nothing to Denny, and Holy Hill was only twenty miles from his own little den. Mr. Desmond and his two daughters were riding well-bred nags of a hard wear and tear sort, though scarcely up to Bankshire form. Mr. Warren arrived on a handsome chestnut, and a wagonette full of Burts also graced the meet. Nor must we forget the butcher from Castle Clare village, and the baker from Ballycasean, each on the animal which, on non-hunting days, had to carry about the business. And there were many others, and crowds of foot people anxious "to see the hunt."

"How is it," asked Colonel Neville, raising his hat to Mrs. Burt, "that we did not see you at Colonel Long's ball the other night, Mrs. Burt? We missed you very much."

This was, perhaps, a little of the national blarney. But Mrs. Burt liked to be considered young, as do most women; and handsome she undoubtedly still was.

"Sure I had an awful cauld," she replied, "and I was afraid to shtrip."

For a moment the Colonel did not grasp her meaning. But when she added, "It was a grand ball, and I could not go in a high-necked dress," the lady's excuse was clear.

Biting his lips and recovering his composure, he hoped that the cold was better, and that Mrs. Burt would honour the party he proposed giving with her presence.

"Of coorse, Colonel; of coorse," she said. "And they tell me it will be grand indeed afterwards?"

"Mr. Clare will do his best," replied the Colonel. "We

shall get on all right if the officers will come over. Otherwise, we shall be short of men."

"You must promise to come and lunch with us, if you draw that way, Mr. Clare," said the Long girls in chorus, as the hounds moved off.

"Oh, we don't lunch on hunting days," replied Geoffrey, laughing. "We could not afford time for it."

"But you can't go on till dark now, you know," urged Ethel Long; "and you will be tired and hungry before four o'clock."

"Yes," Mrs. Long called from the car, "mind you come, Colonel Neville, and bring your English friends, too. I dare say we shall find something to eat for them."

The crowd on foot were now pressing on, and it was time to throw the hounds into cover. Geoffrey was too busy to talk much, but remembered to place Mr. Germaine and his daughter in the best corner, and give them a hint as to which way the fox was likely to break. It was a rough hill-side, and soon Geoffrey was leading his horse through the briars and encouraging the hounds—nor did he work in vain. One note after another sounded, and the people in cars, carts, and carriages began driving furiously along the road at the foot of the cover. Twice they and the eager horsemen, and still more eager foot people, headed the fox back; but at last he made his point, as an old customer will generally do, and started to give them a breather across the wild moor. Here, on the undulating, breezy uplands, there was but little jumping. Hounds were fast, and horses had to gallop to keep up with them. But there were treacherous bogs and awkward holes which might betray the unwary; nor did the little stone walls, which the Irish horses took flying, look very attractive to people from England.

"I don't much like this," said Mr. Germaine, floundering through a boggy place; "it is a horrible country."

"I think it's lovely, papa!" exclaimed Lucy. "Look at the hounds flying up that hill-side like pigeons. And look over there! why, it's the beautiful sea! And such a splendid day, too!"

But Mr. Germaine's weight was telling on his horse, and the stone walls shook him awfully.

"Go on if you like, Lucy," said he. "I believe that is a perfectly safe horse you are on. Stick to Neville, and never mind me. I shall go back to the road. I believe it will rain by-and-bye, too."

"All right, papa," said Lucy, waving her little hand, and giving Obadiah his head. Away he rushed up a stony slope to gain the leaders at the top. There was a short check—and she looked round for the Colonel. He was not with them. "Where is Colonel Neville?" she asked Mellis.

"He said he would not ride hard to hounds to-day," replied the young man; "he just came out to exercise Hailstorm, but he does not want to jump him much yet in this rough country."

"Oh, dear! then I have lost my pilot," cried Lucy, dismayed.

"Sha'n't I do as well?" asked Geoffrey.

Lucy made a little grimace. She remembered Bankshire, and how "the boot had been on the other leg." But she said, politely enough—

"I am afraid you might lead me into mischief, Mr. Clare."

"You could not get Obadiah to fall if you tried," replied Geoffrey. "That's right, Seaman, old man! that's right, Boaster! Hi to him, my beauties! Mellis, look after Milkmaid and Messmate. Away we go—thank goodness! he's not gone to the cliffs this time." For the usual end of a run on the south side of the Carberry country was for the fox to make for the numerous caves in the inaccessible cliffs of the seashore, and thus to save his brush.

"He's gone easht, Mr. Clare," exclaimed Dr. Casey.

"So it seems, doctor," said Geoffrey, as the hounds at last collected, and burst into a loud chorus.

"Easht it is!" yelled young Long, sticking spurs into his horse, and going sideways at a high bank.

Geoffrey picked a better place, and now sent Kildare along. It was easier work going down-hill than up, but more nervous.

None but Irish or Devonshire horses could have galloped over those rough rocks, have slid down places as steep as the roof of a house, have brought their legs under them so cleverly when they slipped on a slab of stone, or when a boulder gave way. The scent was good, the hounds were running well; so occasionally Geoffrey had time to look over his shoulder at Lucy, who kept well in his wake; and when, about ten minutes later, there was another check, she said to him, smiling:

"Excuse my doubting you, Mr. Clare. You are an excellent pilot, and I feel I can trust Obadiah perfectly."

"He's gone back!" exclaimed Denis Kavanagh, as the hounds feathered up and down the lane.

Geoffrey was just about to try back, when young Long whispered, "Don't believe the old fool! He's always hunting hares. The fox is forward, Mr. Clare."

And forward he was, certainly, as Boaster told them very soon—an opinion in which the whole pack agreed. There was an extremely nasty jump out of the lane—a deep, black ditch, and a formidable bank on the other side. Rough-rider Casey sent his young one at it, but the horse baulked, jumped short, and floundered sideways into the ditch. Young Long tried a few yards further: his nag refused, and nearly sent him over his head. Then Denis Kavanagh lolloped up to it in his usual casual, sticky way. But admirable rider though he was, and clever as was his thick-winded dun horse, this was too much for both, and the horse made only a poor attempt, which ended in his subsiding into the ditch.

"Let me try," cried Geoffrey. "Make room, please."

And, sending the spurs into Kildare, he charged it at the best pace he could muster in the short run available. With a great bound, the good horse landed on the top; but, lo! there was another wide, black ditch on the far side, and it appeared almost impossible that he should clear that also. But before Geoffrey could think about it, he had landed safely, and crying out, "'Ware ditch!" he galloped after the hounds. Lucy got safely over next, with something of a scramble; and gradually the

remainder broke down the top of the bank and dribbled through. But the delay gave Geoffrey and his whips a great lead. The latter had managed to get round somehow on the extreme right, and the three, with Lucy, sailed away from the field in rare style. Down now, into the grass meadows of the valley, where the banks were high, but sound and clean, and where the ground was level and good going. The pace improved, and they all sat down to ride.

"Longfield! by Jove!" exclaimed Geoffrey, as the hounds swerved to the left, and pointed for the covers on the distant hills, which surrounded Colonel Long's house. "We shall get some lunch after all."

The turn let up some of the field, among whom came even Denis Kavanagh and Tom Kirk. As usual, no one had seen the latter jump his cob over anything more than a foot high; but he was there somehow. And as to Denis, he always managed to be "in the best of the hunt," as he phrased it, by hook or by crook. Now they came to the little brook which meandered through the green valley, and the hounds crossed it flying. It was not a very wide one, but there was a regular fortification on the other side—a steep, high bank, faced with stone, and affording no foothold for a scramble. Kavanagh was first to reach the brook on the right.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, pulling up, and looking at the running water and the nasty grass-grown wall. "This is jeopardy!"

"Jeopardy be blowed!" cried Geoffrey, turning Kildare back for a run, and galloping at it at the rate of fifty miles an hour. "Here goes!"

The good horse tried his best and landed safely on the wall; but it was too narrow, and he could not get his hind legs under him. Quick as thought Geoffrey threw himself over his shoulders, on the right side, and Kildare, relieved of the weight scrambled up somehow and landed safely. Mr. Kavanagh deliberately looked for a place where he could ride his horse into the water, and then with equal deliberation stopped him in it, and

almost standing in the saddle climbed off the dun's back to the top of the wall. Then he called to the horse, who climbed out of the brook like a cat, and followed his master. Meanwhile Lucy, seeing the awkwardness of the place, had turned off after Mr. Kirk, who of course made for the nearest bridge. In twenty minutes' time the fox was in the small spinney below Longfield, and here he was headed back into the very midst of the hounds and killed in cover.

"Now," said Colonel Long, who had unconsciously helped to head the fox, "the girls are waiting to give you lunch. It's just beginning to rain, too, and your horses might as well have some gruel. You *must* come in, Miss Germaine: and so must you, Mr. Kavanagh."

Denis was not quite in county society, and rather shy, but he was always glad of a drop of the "craythur," so consented. With the usual tact and hospitality of the Irish gentleman, Colonel Long paid particular attention to Mr. Kavanagh, while Mrs. Long took charge of Lucy, both knowing that Geoffrey, Mellis, and Mr. Kirk, with whom the family were on the most intimate terms, would find their own way to the dining-room. Geoffrey stayed behind to see the hounds locked up, and as a result Denis was the first to enter the house, which he did from the yard. The back hall was very dark, and the younger girls, who were grouped at the foot of the stairs, waiting for their visitors, saw looming indistinctly under them a hunting-cap and a pink coat. The wearer was much surprised at receiving a tremendous though soft blow when he entered the hall. It knocked his cap off and nearly knocked him over, though, after all, it was only a bolster that inflicted it.

"What is the meaning of this, girls?" shouted Colonel Long, while Denis, all dazed, sought to pick up his hat.

There was a squeal and a shriek. "Oh, dear! we thought it was Mr. Clare!" Then a rush of girls up the stairs.

Mr. Kavanagh said, almost audibly, "Sure, I suppose it's only the way of the quality." But the reception brought back his shyness. He refused to enter the dining-room, and would

not be introduced to Mrs. Long. The Colonel was profuse in apologies and explanations. The girls had barricaded themselves up-stairs, whence shouts of laughter were heard at intervals. The entrance of Geoffrey and his staff caused a diversion, under cover of which Denis escaped to the servants' hall, whence he was not to be drawn at any price. Then he quietly discussed whiskey and cold beef, till the shower was over and all resumed their horses.

Not much more was done on that day. The weather had become stormy and scent had disappeared. Their way home was through the village, and they would have to pass the cottage of the old woman whose cat had been killed. Geoffrey hoped that she had not seen the murder. But when they approached the high wall and the village Geoffrey looked over the pack.

"Where is Seaman?" he asked. "Mike, you're not looking out. Always see that the hounds are together."

At that moment Seaman appeared on the top of the wall, and jumped down into the road to join his comrades. Horror! he had found the corpse of the cat and was bringing it back with him.

Yells and whipcord were of no avail. They only resulted in Seaman dashing off through the village at full tear, with several puppies after him, anxious for their share of the cat. The old woman was at her door, and spotted the culprit at once.

"If you please, yer honour," cried she, in a shrill voice: "I beg your pardon, yer honour, but your dog has killed me cat! I'm a poor lone woman, and what compensation will ye be giving me? It's cats you're after hunting instead of foxes. Sure you could find better game than them, Mr. Clare! It's cruel to the poor lone widow woman you are, Mr. Clare, killing her cat!"

There was no escape. Fortunately the number of spectators was now very small, as most of the field had long ago retired. Lucy was holding her handkerchief to her face to conceal her laughter. Mellis was frankly delighted. Mikey tried to answer the poor lone widow, but she gave him no chance, keeping up

an uninterrupted flow of lamentations from her position in the middle of the road, and rapidly collecting round her a crowd of loafers.

"Here, Mrs. Sullivan: I'm very sorry for my hound's misbehaviour. Here's half a sovereign. That's enough to pay for a dozen cats," said Geoffrey, handing her the coin. "Now let us get home."

"I'm very much obliged to you, Mr. Clare," continued the old lady, "but that's not enough compensation. What am I to have to kape me company these dark nights?"

"Oh, that's plenty," said Geoffrey, now knowing enough of the Irish to be aware that they are never satisfied. "Let us get home, Miss Germaine."

And away they trotted, leaving the old lady still lamenting, but in her heart very joyful that her cat had brought her such a handsome present.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE EVICTION.

"Those McCarthys could pay perfectly well if they chose?" said Colonel Neville.

"Certainly," replied Mr. Crosby, the agent.

They were discussing matters in the library at the castle. Since Geoffrey's refusal to help in boycotting, and his successful resistance, the inhabitants of Castle Clare, and more particularly Colonel Neville the guardian, and Mr. Crosby the agent, who were believed to have guided the young man's conduct, were especially hateful to the National League. The local branch could do nothing, for the local tradesmen and labourers were now no longer to be coerced into hostility, as they found that they incurred no real risk by supplying and working for the castle. But some of the farmers were bitterly angry. In the market, the fair, and the hunting-field, they were all smiles and civility to Colonel Neville and Geoffrey. In their hearts, however, they had long cherished the hope of making the No Rent movement universal in Carberry, and were making fair progress in this direction when Geoffrey's intervention on behalf of Driscoll upset their plans for a time. Only, however, for a time. The League in Dublin was not so easily beaten by an audacious youth as the branches at Castle Clare village and Ballyvartey. When Michaelmas came round, and Mr. Crosby claimed the rents for the estate —not, as in England, to date, but only up to the previous Lady Day—there was an almost unanimous demand for fifty per cent. reduction. Colonel Neville had, during the past spring and summer, examined into every case of hardship and rack-renting. Though several tenants had applied to the court for a judicial rent, he had in some cases consented to reduce even the sums thus fixed. He had always consulted Geoffrey, and these consultations, which were at first mere matters of form, soon became serious; for after the attempts at boycotting the castle, the young

man was as much interested in the agrarian question as any of his neighbours. Mr. Crosby—whom the tenants hated, and whose heart a long residence in one of the most disturbed districts had undoubtedly hardened against the alternate cringing and bullying with which the Irish farmers attempt to evade their obligations—more than once warned both the Colonel and Geoffrey against the consequences of their too great leniency. But until the end of November, that is, until the time of the Germaines' visit, Colonel Neville had resolutely refused to believe in anything like an organized conspiracy on the Clare estates. He and Geoffrey both contended that they had done so much for the tenants, had not only reduced the rents liberally, but had rebuilt cottages, drained bogs, and restored tumble-down sheds and stables, without expecting any return for the money, that the most ordinary feelings of gratitude would induce the people to behave decently.

They had yet to learn, that though the Nationalist farmer has always the expression, "I'm very grateful to yer honour," or, "I'm very thankful to ye," on his lips, the League to which he belongs will not permit him to act on these expressions.

"All the McCarthys can pay, as you know yourself, Colonel Neville; and, as to the Gearys, they are almost worse. You have drained their bog for them, and have rebuilt Pat Geary's cottage; he saved a fine crop of hay last summer, and he can afford to keep quite a herd of cattle. Yet he won't pay six shillings an acre."

"I fear you are right. It is a preconcerted plan," sighed the Colonel.

"Undoubtedly, the evidence is overwhelming. They are determined to revenge themselves for Mr. Geoffrey's plucky stand in the summer."

"We cannot afford any more reductions," said Colonel Neville.

"No. Your rents are the lowest in the county. And even if you reduced them still more, you would not get the money. They have all agreed to ask for a further fifty per cent., and upon my word, if you gave in to so outrageous a demand, I believe they would not pay after all."

"We must take strong measures, though I detest them."

"I have always recommended them as the only means," said Mr. Crosby.

Colonel Neville was a man whom it was very difficult to arouse to anger, and he was most unwilling to be hard on any sinner. But if he saw reformation to be hopeless, if he were once convinced that wrong was intended, and that the sinner sinned of malice prepense, he adopted a determined course and stuck to it.

After a few minutes silence he said :—

"We evicted that young rascal Sheehy a fortnight ago, and it did no good."

"Except that he has paid, Colonel."

"That is true, but the sheriff's men were too rough."

"The man was a noisy impertinent rascal, Colonel, and only a very small man."

"Then we must make an example of the worst of the others. Whom shall we bundle out first? Perhaps when they see that I mean business, the rest will give in."

"I hope so," said Mr. Crosby. "In my opinion, we had better evict the brothers Geary. They think you are afraid of them," added he.

"Pat Geary has a sick wife," objected the Colonel, declining to notice the agent's hint.

"My dear sir, if you won't turn out any of them who have a sick wife or a sick child, you will just have to get on without any rents at all, for the whole country side will have invalid families."

"I believe you are right, Crosby. But no violence must be used, and we must find some place for that sick woman."

"You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs," objected Mr. Kirk, who had strayed noiselessly into the room, where he was always welcome.

"But there are degrees of violence even in the breaking of eggs," objected the Colonel. "You need not smash them all with a bludgeon. In fact, it would not improve the omelette. I shall stand by myself to see that no unnecessary harshness is shown, and I think that when they see me there, and understand that I mean business, they will pay up."

"It is unusual for a landlord to place himself in so unpleasant a position," said Mr. Crosby.

"I am not the landlord," replied Colonel Neville, "I am only head agent."

"True."

The conference ended by their deciding to evict the two Gearys first, and to follow this up by turning out the McCarthys if they still proved obstinate. As soon as Geoffrey heard of his guardian's decision to attend, he declared that he would also go, but to this Colonel Neville objected strongly, and was almost peremptory in his prohibition.

"I am of age now," said Geoffrey, "and ——." He was about to add, "you cannot prevent me," when Mr. Kirk gave him a warning kick under the table, for the conversation took place over dessert, after the ladies had left the room.

Geoffrey looked at Tom, who winked and held his tongue. As soon as there was an opportunity for a private talk, he asked him what he meant.

"The governor is determined to go," said Mr. Kirk, "and as he knows there may be a disturbance, he won't let you come with him if he can help it."

"Exactly," replied Geoffrey, "and I won't stop away. I like a row for its own sake, but when the old governor is in one, the devil himself sha'n't prevent my joining in."

"Well," remarked Mr. Kirk, "I cannot say that I entertain the same affection for fighting as you do; but, on this occasion, I agree, we ought to be present."

"You also?" asked Geoffrey, surprised. "I'm glad of it! But then why did you kick me?"

"It's of no use contradicting, it will only vex him. Let him drive off with Crosby, and you and I can start afterwards on our own account. We shall reach the scene of action soon enough." So it was agreed. But Kirk added jestingly: "We had better take some bandages and some diachylon plaster. There may be broken heads."

Many a truth is spoken in jest, and little did Tom Kirk anticipate that his jocular remark about the possibility of broken heads would soon prove so terribly earnest.

On the day fixed for the eviction, Colonel Neville made all arrangements for Geoffrey and Tom to pay a round of visits with Mr. and Mrs. Germaine, to return the civilities of the neighbours. As agreed beforehand, they acquiesced, but as soon as the Colonel had started, they took Mr. Germaine into their confidence, and as he was quite as anxious for Neville's safety as they themselves were, he willingly forewent their company. To the ladies they simply said that urgent business connected with the estate compelled them to go out for the day, and they started a couple of hours after the Colonel. As the latter was to call for Mr. Crosby, and to wait for the sheriff's officer and police from Duneen, his cart would certainly be delayed, and it was not likely that the evicting party would reach Pat Geary's holding—an Irish mile beyond Ballyvartey—before one o'clock. It was almost that hour when Geoffrey and Tom Kirk drove up. Geary's cottage was a few hundred yards back from the narrow cross-road, on which the cars had halted. Colonel Neville, Mr. Crosby, and two constables were standing close by, just outside the gate, while the sheriff's officer and his men attempted to effect an entrance. This was no easy matter. The cottage was securely barricaded, the doors were locked, and the small windows roughly closed from inside with boards. Evidently the tenants had had ample warning, and had not wasted their time. Many voices were heard from within; and the small back yard, of which the gates were also closed, appeared to be strongly garrisoned. For a few minutes Geoffrey and Kirk waited outside, unwilling to show themselves until their assistance might be required. Soon the sheriff's men returned to consult with Mr. Crosby.

"The ditch (Irish for fence) is low enough on the other side," said the officer; "the boys will easily get in that way, and surprise them, or we can break in the front door."

"Which will be the least likely to cause a row?" asked Colonel Neville.

"We are in for a bit of fun, anyway," replied the sheriff's man, "but I think if we take them from behind, there's the best chance of getting our work done."

"So be it then," said the Colonel, "but we must work judi-

ciously. Take the constables, and knock again at the front door. Talk to them. If they open it, well and good, I shall be glad to settle matters without a disturbance. If they don't, your lads should climb the fence into the back yard, and at a signal take possession. They can work round behind the walls till they get into proper position."

"Right, Colonel; but who is to give the signal? Whoever it is will want to see the front door, and yet not to be seen by the boys."

"We will," said Tom Kirk, stepping forward with Geoffrey. "When the police knock at the door, I will move round to the stone wall on the right. They won't take much notice of that, and I shall be near enough to hear every word. Geoffrey can go on to the next fence, just beyond the house there. It's behind the corner, and of course he could not see the front door. But he can see me, and the sheriff's men will be able to see him. If I find they won't let the police in, I will hold up my hand. Geoffrey will do the same, and the fellows behind can charge the fence."

"I wish you had not come!" exclaimed the Colonel reproachfully to Geoffrey. "I particularly desired you to go out with the Germaines."

"It is all my fault," interposed Tom Kirk. "I persuaded him to come with me. I thought we might be wanted; and, you know," he added, in a low voice, "it will do the lad no harm to give him a LOOSE REIN now."

"Keep him out of danger then!" answered the Colonel, in a hasty whisper. "If there is any row, hold him back by force if he won't be quiet otherwise."

"All right," said Kirk; "never fear."

"Now let us get to work," continued the Colonel. "Mr. Crosby and I will of course remain here. Remember that I have come to arrange matters amicably if I can; so if Pat Geary shows any inclination to come to terms, I shall be delighted to listen to him. You had better say so at once."

"Very well, your honour," replied the sheriff's officer. "But it is not very likely."

Then he sent his *posse* up the cross-road, with directions to turn sharp to the left when they were out of sight, and to take

the cottage in the rear by a circuit under the shelter of the high turf banks, which, in this wild country, were all overgrown with gorse and brambles, and afforded a splendid cover. Geoffrey accompanied them to the corner half way. The occupants of the farm, who had no doubt provided spy-holes in their boards, could not see anything of the road except just opposite the gate, and during the consultation all had been careful to withdraw from this exposed point. When, in the Colonel's opinion, sufficient time had elapsed for the party to take up the two stations, the sheriff's officer and the police approached the house, while he and Mr. Crosby stepped into sight inside the gate. After repeated knocking, a lively conversation ensued, of which Mr. Kirk and the Colonel could only hear one side, that proceeding from the officer. He was gentle, persuasive, almost eloquent. He pointed out to Pat Geary and his friends how vain would be their resistance, that it could only end in broken heads and gaol. He expatiated on the friendliness and generosity of Colonel Neville, who, he assured them, would willingly listen to any reasonable offer. This was met by derisive laughter. Its sound reached the Colonel, and made him shiver, for it reminded him of the howls of the hyenas round his camp in the jungle. When there appeared no chance of the door being opened, the police began to batter at it, and to try and break their way in. The attack was a feint, but the inmates evidently considered it serious, for there was yelling and screaming for help from inside, and the reserves were brought up from the rear. Then the sheriff's officer quickly raised and dropped his hand. Kirk repeated the movement, and Geoffrey, who had been sitting on his fence for some minutes, rose to his feet, waved his hand, and jumped down. A few discordant yells then rose from the back yard, but they were scarcely audible on account of the turmoil in the cottage, where the police continued to hammer at the door noisily, but with very little real violence, while the women screamed and the men cursed them.

"Stand back, Dan," cried one of the sheriff's men, as he sprang from the fence into the yard, "there are six of us, and you've no call to get locked up." And Dan, who had been left alone to guard the rear, saw that resistance was hopeless, and

dropped his blackthorn stick, for the *posse* was all inside by this time, and Geoffrey among them.

"Squire Clare," said one, "you go back to the Colonel. He will be wanting you more than we do! We are in possession now."

Quickly the men entered the back door of the cottage, pushing aside a couple of the defenders who had now, too late, heard the noise of the attack from the rear. Pat Geary himself then called out to his friends to be quiet.

"It's a traithor has let them in from behind, boys," he said. "There's the police at the front door too. It's no use whatever; we're bate. Get away home wid ye, and lave me to settle with the Colonel."

The order was obeyed instantly, for though all of them would carry passive resistance to the last extremity, they were afraid of a fight with the officers of the law in open day. There were other means by which they could better attain their ends than by a contest which could only end to their disadvantage. In five minutes the cottage was cleared of all except the brothers Geary and a number of women, the wives and sisters of the defeated garrison, who remained behind to make a noise. The front door was opened, and the sheriff's officer took formal possession.

Then the women rushed out into the road, and began the regulation farce, literally a "screaming" one.

"It's hard on the poor folks ye are, Colonel, turning them out into the cold this weather."

"May the curse of Heaven blight ye for a villain!" shrieked an old harridan, clenching her fist.

"It's not Mr. Crosby who would have done the like," cried another. "He's hard enough, but he's none so bad as the Colonel."

"And there's young master Geoffrey standing there. Bless his purty face," a younger woman said: "he is very kind to the poor folks. There's many a sixpence he's given behind the old Colonel's back. When he comes to the property, he won't be so hard on us."

"May God forgive ye!" shrieked the old hag, "though ye don't desarve it, Colonel."

"You'll rot in yer grave soon, if there's one of the boys that knows what right."

"It's you, and the like of you, that's the curse of auld Ireland!"

"He's no Christian either. He's worse than a Jew."

"He's turning our poor childher out into the cauld and wet, so he'd have stood by and seen our Saviour crucified!"

"Stand back, women, stand back," said the sergeant, sternly. "There has been enough row already."

Still cursing, gnashing their teeth, and throwing out their arms wildly, the women slowly retired, not without many taunts at the police, and challenges to use violence against "poor wake females."

"Pat Geary would wish to speak to your honour," said the sheriff's officer, now coming forward. "He'd like to come to some arrangement. But he wishes to speak to you privately. I would be careful if I were you, Sir," he added, in a low voice.

"All right," said Colonel Neville, delighted with the prospect of a peaceable arrangement. "I will talk to him with pleasure."

Pat Geary and his brother came out of the cottage; one who is termed in Ireland a foxy man, of small stature, the other a tall, gaunt, half-shaven, black fellow. The red-haired man, Pat, was all civility and obsequiousness, but there was a lurking gleam in his little grey pig-like eyes which boded no good. The other was simply an ill-conditioned ruffian.

"We would be for making some accommodation, Colonel," said Pat, very politely. "Me and my brother would not like to be turned out of the farm."

"I shall be glad to meet you in every possible way," replied Neville.

"That's spaking like a jintleman, your honour," said Pat, with an air of genuine cordiality. "But it's not before all these boys that I'd like a word with ye, Sir: they'd be interrupting us, and it's none of their business."

"Very well, come over here," replied the Colonel, simply. He moved away to the left, about thirty yards from the gate, near a large haystack which was in itself sufficient to prove that Pat was well able to pay his rent. The two men followed him.

"It is not safe," whispered Kirk to Mr. Crosby and Geoffrey. "There is no telling what those rascals may do."

"We will join him," answered Mr. Crosby. "The police have enough to do to keep all the women quiet."

"No," interrupted Geoffrey, "I think they want to talk to him out of *your* hearing, Mr. Crosby. They fancy he will be easier to deal with if you are out of the way."

"True," said the agent; "as if I were not as anxious for a settlement as any one!"

"Mr. Kirk and I will go," continued Geoffrey. "The Gearys cannot object to us."

Unobtrusively the two sauntered up to the Colonel, who was

listening to a voluble and partly unintelligible flow of words from Pat Geary. "It's well the young squire should listen, yer honour; it's his business as much as yours," he remarked, when Geoffrey approached; and then he continued a long and entirely fictitious story of his misery and his poverty, while the cattle in the fields around and the large haystacks bore evidence to his falsehoods.

There was much talk on the side of the brothers, and a few questions by the Colonel; who at last said:

"I am quite aware that you are in a difficulty, though I warn you that I do not believe a single word of what you have said.—Now hold your tongue, Geary," he added sharply, seeing that Pat was about to start fresh again; "you have had your say, and I have listened to you; now listen to me, both of you."

"That's fair," ejaculated the brothers, who could not keep silent.

"Well, I know you are in an awkward position. If you pay me, you are likely to be boycotted. Now don't talk," he said again, raising his hand. "You have plenty of money, and plenty of cattle; but you don't want to be boycotted, and I quite understand your objection. I tell you what I will do. If you pay half the rent and arrears, I will pretend to put you in as caretaker, and not let any one know that you have paid anything. You can trust me, can you not?"

"Av' coorse, yer' honour!"

"Very well, and as to those two gentlemen, they will promise not to tell."

"We should certainly not say a word," said Geoffrey. "Why it is my interest to keep my tenants."

Meanwhile Pat had been glancing uneasily towards the haystack more than once.

"Is that your last word, Colonel?" he asked.

"My very last. If you don't agree to it, out you go."

Geoffrey nodded approval. "Well, you honour," said Pat, "you think you're fair, but you're hard on a poor man. May I be spaking a word to me brother?"

"Certainly," said the Colonel, and the two retired towards the cottage.

"You must not let a whisper get about," said the Colonel, when they were out of hearing, "if these men give in."

"But it will look as if we were beaten by the League," remarked Tom Kirk, while Geoffrey, whose eyes had before been following those of Pat Geary, glanced curiously at the big haystack.

"Never mind what it looks like," replied Colonel Neville. "We must help these chaps to resist the League by fair means or foul. We have no choice left. They will become friends of ours if they find we can be trusted, and we shall have allies in the enemy's camp."

At that moment Geoffrey became certain of what before he had only suspected. He saw a head peeping out cautiously from behind the stack, and then hastily withdrawn. But the next moment he saw something which made him jump forward, between the haystack and the Colonel, and cry out loudly, Take care."

His cry came too late. Besides, what could the two others have done? There was a flash, and two sharp reports following each other. Geoffrey staggered, and fell heavily back on his guardian, for whom the shots were intended. The police rushed forward; but before they could reach the other side the man who had fired the shots had made the best of his start. He had already jumped the first two fences and placed a respectable distance between himself and his pursuers. The sergeant cried out, "It must be Mike Sheehy, by G—: the man the Colonel evicted last month. Try and catch sight of the devil. We want just enough to swear to him!"

Meanwhile Geoffrey was lying unconscious in the Colonel's arms. Blood gushed from his mouth, and blood trickled slowly from ugly wounds in his chest and legs. Tom Kirk was trying to stop the flow with the bandages he had brought in jest rather than earnest.

"My poor lad," cried the Colonel, the tears flowing down his face. "What is my old life to yours? Why did you save me?"

* * * * * *

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CONCLUSION.

WOMEN who had just cursed Colonel Neville and Mr. Crosby like devils now vied with each other in offering their help. It was not possible to place the wounded man on a side-car or a dog-cart, so he was carefully put on a gate covered with rugs, and the brothers Geary themselves offered to carry him at least to Ballyvartey, where it would be easy to obtain further help. They were eager and voluble in disclaiming any complicity with the outrage, and it was probably true that they neither suggested it nor knew when and where it would occur. But that they were aware that Sheehy entertained murderous intentions was more than probable. Colonel Neville was completely absorbed in anxiety for his ward. Mr. Crosby took it upon himself to reinstate Pat Geary as caretaker for the time being, the eviction having been carried out. All the police except one were in pursuit of the assassin, whoever he was; but the early shades of evening were approaching and he had every chance of making good his escape.

A telegram was sent from Ballyvartey to summon Doctor Casey. Nationalist though he was, Colonel Neville knew that he could trust him to do his best for Geoffrey, pending the arrival of an eminent surgeon from Kildonan. Mr. Germaine himself

came with the doctor. They found Geoffrey lying in the best bedroom at old Hurley's. As before, there was a dense crowd in an narrow street of Ballyvartey; but this evening it was not noisy and insolent as in the summer. A great fear and awe had fallen on the people. They knew, notwithstanding their public complaints and lamentations, that they had been well treated by their landlord, and that if there were any real grievances still unremoved, Geoffrey was not only not responsible for them but had since his arrival in the country done his best for all. The Clare of Castle Clare was a great man, too; and these ignorant farmers and peasants knew not what might happen in consequence of the rash deed of one of their number. They feared the worst. The Government might, possibly, take severe measures—arrest a number of them, lock them up without trial —possibly shoot and hang, as their leaders always told them was the nature of the English Government to do. And many amongst them were sincerely grateful to and fond of the young squire. These were not only awe-stricken and full of fear, but actively indignant and angry that evil should thus have been returned for good. It was a disgrace to Carberry! What would their friends in England say when they heard of it? How could they stand up for men who tried to kill their young landlord, a man who had only just come amongst them, and had done nothing but good since he had come? A well-favoured, plucky fellow, too, who could use his fists and did not mind work, who spent money on the country and gave them a hunt twice a-week, who drained bogs and built up cottages, who had always a kind word and a shilling for poor people.

So, for one reason or another, the anxiety of the villagers was deep and genuine. When at last Dr. Casey emerged from Hurley's house he was overwhelmed with questions, and there was a chorus of "Thank God!" when he said that Mr. Clare was not in immediate danger.

The wounds were cruel, but as the weapon was an old smooth-bore and the projectiles buckshot they were not very deep. No vital part seemed to be affected, but the flesh was frightfully torn, and the neglect of any precaution might entail the most serious

consequences. Early next morning the patient was carried to Castle Clare, where the Kildonan surgeon awaited him. Careful nursing, entire quiet, and the most scrupulous attention to diet were enjoined.

Colonel Neville was full of self-reproaches, though no one else could think that any blame could possibly attach to him. Offers of help from the neighbours—the Longs, the Kearneys, the Butlers, Warrens and Burts—were as numerous as the visitors themselves. Mrs. Germaine, however, at once undertook the office of head-nurse. Though Colonel Neville protested that she must not think of thus spending the few weeks of her visit to Ireland, that he could get a professional nurse from Dublin, and that he could not allow her to exhaust herself in looking after the patient, she was not to be moved, and stuck to her determination to avail herself of this opportunity to prove her gratitude to Colonel Neville for his goodness in past years. Eventually she gained her point. She was glad to be helped by an active young woman from Kildonan, and she was vigorously supported by Lucy, but she reserved the chief management for herself, and no one had better reason to be satisfied than Geoffrey. As soon as he was allowed to speak at all, he asked the Colonel not to stop hunting.

"You can handle the hounds better than I can, sir," he said, in a weak voice, "and we have no business to spoil the fun of the whole country because a blackguard has peppered me: Mellis will help you, I know."

He was so urgent in his request, and returned to the matter so often, that Colonel Neville at last consented; and after a week's interval, when Geoffrey's condition no longer caused apprehension, the hounds once more met at Holy Hill. Sheehy had disappeared; the little farm from which he had been evicted was derelict. But his act, if his it was, did not turn the course of even-handed justice, on which the Colonel and Geoffrey had previously determined. When two more recalcitrant tenants had been bundled out, the remainder came to terms, and in most cases paid up in full. As soon as a spirit of conciliation was shown on their part, the Colonel and Mr. Crosby were

willing to meet them, and the central authority of the National League did not interfere. Its leaders were, and are, far too clever to play a losing game. The feeling in Carberry ran too strongly in favour of peace and harmony for the League to venture on further hostility. Geoffrey's sufferings, witnessed and related by Doctor Casey, were discussed in every cottage and every hut, and they disarmed all except the heathen ruffians and drunken corner-boys who are the instruments by which the League carries out its decrees, but who have no influence on the decrees themselves. Those of the leaders who were insensible to gratitude, to pity, or to sympathy, were wise enough to be silent. So when the Colonel rode up to Holy Hill on old Patrick, with the hounds round him, he was received more warmly, and with more heartfelt inquiries after his ward, than if he had been in Bankshire itself.

During the first few weeks that Geoffrey was confined to the house the pain was intense; but it gradually abated, and with its abatement there came the feelings of impatience and boredom almost inseparable from convalescence. Mrs. Germaine had done her best; but she was so much older than Geoffrey, and he still held her in so much awe, that though he now liked her, and felt very grateful to her, he could not exactly be amused by her company. With Lucy, however, it was different. She volunteered to read to him, and he found it very pleasant to listen to her. Then they talked of horses and hounds and foxes, subjects on which they fully sympathised. When these were exhausted she suggested games, and Geoffrey became quite animated over dominoes and "Reversals." The muscles of his left leg had been so lacerated that walking and riding were, for a long time, out of the question. He found the hours hang heavily when Lucy went out with the hounds, or accompanied her mother on a round of visits, and he watched the hands of the clock impatiently till she returned. Pewter did his best to get him what he wanted, and often stayed to converse with his young master, for whom he felt the sincerest pity. But Pewter's conversation was not as amusing to Geoffrey as formerly; and even Mellis, though always welcome, irritated him occasionally by shaking

his couch, or noisily walking across the room, or by some other trifle which a man in good health would not have noticed.

As to Mr. Kirk, he spent more and more of his time at Longfield. When Geoffrey chaffed him about this one day, and asked him how he managed to get on with Mrs. Long's dinners, Tom replied, sincerely:

"Miss Ethel Long is a very remarkable young lady: she can actually cook. It is she who makes the dinners possible. In fact, she is one of the few females I have met who take a proper interest in the preparation of food."

It soon came out that Mr. Kirk spent many dull winter afternoons in Mrs. Long's kitchen, instructing Ethel in the mysteries of a *Portugaise* sauce, or in the sleight-of-hand necessary to make an omelet. That he was much teased by the other girls goes without saying, but Tom Kirk was steadfast and too much hardened to mind being teased. Nothing ever upset his conviction that cookery was a fine art deserving of deep study and devoted work.

Christmas was now approaching, and it was with a feeling of dismay that Geoffrey heard of Mrs. Germaine's intention to return to Bankshire. He had come to consider her and Lucy a part of Castle Clare, and had not thought of the necessity of their leaving. Though he was now much better, the doctor told him that he must not think of riding again during the winter: so he would be confined to the house, and would lose the charming companions who had made the house tolerable to him. But they were bound to go. Mrs. Germaine's presence at home was required, for her boys would be home from school, and her husband, who had returned some time back, could not longer get on without her.

"Could not Lucy stop?" asked Geoffrey of Colonel Neville, the day after Mrs. Germaine's departure was announced.

"Scarcely," replied the Colonel, smiling. "I don't think her mother would leave her in a house full of men."

"*Must* they go?" asked Geoffrey again.

"I have suggested that they should have the boys over," answered Colonel Neville. "In this enormous house we have

"She can actually cook!"

room enough for the whole family; and they would delight in the free life, the fishing, shooting, and hunting."

"That would be splendid!" said Geoffrey. "Won't Mrs. Germaine consent?"

"She declines, so far. But perhaps if you back me up, it might be done."

"I'll try," said Geoffrey.

Geoffrey tried. Probably he would not have succeeded if another event had not occurred which made the Colonel more urgent in his entreaties. That same evening Mr. Tom Kirk solemnly took him aside after dinner and said he wished to speak to him privately.

Neville led the way to the library.

"What on earth is the matter?" he asked. "You look as if you were going to a funeral."

"It is not precisely that," replied Tom, very gravely. "In fact, it is the reverse. I am thinking of going to a wedding."

"A wedding? Whose?"

"My own," answered Kirk. "I have decided to marry."

"The deuce you have! Well, I congratulate you heartily, old man! Who is the happy lady?" asked the Colonel, warmly seizing his friend's hand.

"I have found a girl with whom I can thoroughly sympathise," said Kirk, "and who, I believe, thoroughly sympathises with me. It is Miss Ethel Long."

"Ethel Long!" exclaimed Neville. "She is charming, but she's only eighteen!"

"Notwithstanding her tender years," Kirk answered, solemnly, "I believe her mind is fully developed. We shall devote our lives to making each other and our fellow-creatures happy."

"By contriving and cooking good dinners?" interrupted the Colonel.

"Precisely," replied Mr. Kirk. "Ethel has a singular artistic conception, and an aptitude I have, so far, not observed in any of her sex. I think I am indeed fortunate."

"You are, old fellow. I am delighted."

"The wedding will be very soon. Colonel Long and I are both averse to prolonged engagements. I propose starting for London to-morrow to arrange matters."

When Mrs. Germaine heard this news she no longer hesitated to write to her husband, who willingly consented to bring his boys over and have another four weeks with the woodcock. Lucy laughed when she was told of the engagement, but Geoffrey became very serious. He had now re-established his reputation. He thought of his own future, and visions of a purer helpmate than Mrs. Emmeline Flatman crossed his mind. Perhaps the Colonel's thoughts ran in the same direction. Geoffrey required no curb now, but the loose rein would be better in the hands of a gentle woman than hanging on his neck.

"Tom," said the Colonel, as he saw his friend off at Kildonan station, "what wedding present shall I give you? It is now usual to ask people beforehand, for fear of duplicates."

"My dear Neville," replied Kirk, "I am going to ask for a present which no one else could give: only it is a very great thing to ask for."

"What is it? Speak out."

"Give me François," said Kirk. "We should not be happy without each other."

* * * * *

"Lucy, dear," whispered Geoffrey, two months later, as they turned away from the front door of Longfield, whence Mr. and Mrs. Tom Kirk had just driven in a shower of old slippers, "Come into the shrubbery."

What did he ask her in the shrubbery? And what did Lucy answer? Our readers may guess. We shall not tell them, for nobody heard, and we do not know.

THE END.

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